RALPH IN THE SWITCH TOWER

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RALPH QUICKLY AND DEFTLY ATTENDED TO THE CALL FOR SEVERAL SWITCHES.

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RALPH IN THE SWITCH TOWER

OR

CLEARING THE TRACK

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

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Ralph in the Switch Tower

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RALPH IN THE SWITCH TOWER

CHAPTER I--DOWN AND OUT

"Get out of here!" said Jack Knight, head towerman of the Great Northern Railroad, at Stanley Junction.

"Why, I ain't doing no harm," retorted Mort Bemis, ex-leverman of the depot switch tower.

"And stay out. Hear me?" demanded Knight, big as a bear, and quite as gruff.

"What's the call for sitting down on a fellow this way, I'd like to know!" muttered Bemis sullenly.

"You're a bad lot, that's what," growled the veteran railroader. "You always were and you always will be. I'm through with you. So is the railroad company. What's the call, you meddlesome, malicious reprobate? That's the call!" fairly shouted the towerman, red of face and choleric of voice.

He moved one arm as he spoke. It hung in a sling, and the hand was swathed in bandages.

"There's some of your fine, Smart-Aleck work," he went on angrily. "Come now, take yourself out of here! This is a place for workers, not loafers."

Mort Bemis gave Jack Knight a revengeful look. Then he moved towards the trap in the floor.

The scene was the depot switch tower at Stanley Junction, in sight of the local passenger depot. It loomed up thirty feet in the air, glass-windowed on every side. It was neat, light, and airy. In its center, running nearly its length, was the row of long heavy levers that controlled the depot and siding switches of the terminus of the Great Northern Railroad.

The big-framed, business-faced man who bustled among these, keeping an angry eye meantime on an unwelcome visitor, was a veteran and a marvel in local railroad circles.

When the Great Northern had come to Stanley Junction, ten years back, it brought old Jack Knight with it,

He had an eye like an eagle and the muscles of a giant. The inside of his head was popularly believed to be a vast railroad map. He controlled the main rails, switches, and sidings, like a woman would the threads of an intricate knitting piece. He directed the locomotives and trains up and down that puzzling network of rails, like puppets moved by strings. In ten years' service he had never been responsible for an accident or a wreck.

Old Jack, therefore, having never made a mistake in railroading, had little patience with the careless, lazy specimen whom he had just ordered out of the place.

Mort Bemis had been his assistant in the tower. The fellow's record had always been full of flaws. He was slow and indifferent at the levers. He associated with a shiftless crowd outside. He borrowed money and did not pay it back. He was unreliable, disagreeable, and unpopular.

Three days previous, old Jack was adjusting a heavy weight bar on the lower story of the switch tower.

Mort, upstairs, was supposed to safely hold back a spring-bar apparatus while his superior was fixing the delicate mechanism below.

His mind everywhere except on his task, Mort for an instant took his hand off the bar to wave a recognition to a chosen chum, "flipping" a passing freight train.

There was a frightful yell below. Mort, terrified, pulled back the bar. Then he stuck his head through the trap. There stood old Jack, pale as death, one hand crushed and mutilated through his helper's outrageous lapse of duty.

The old railroader's rage was terrible, as he forgot his pain and hurt in the realization that for the first time in ten years he was crippled from active service.

The frightened Mort made a dive for a window. He slid down the water-spout outside, got to the nearest switch shanty, telephoned the depot master about the accident,--and made himself scarce.

Mort joined some chosen chums in one of the haunts of Railroad Street. He reported by 'phone "on the sick list" next morning. He did not show up until two

days later, "after a good and easy rest," as he put it, and then fancying old Jack's "grouch" had cooled down.

Mort's reception has been related. He was informed that the railroad company had peremptorily discharged him. As to old Jack himself, Mort readily discerned that the veteran railroader was aching to give him a good hiding.

Mort did not wait to furnish an excuse for this. He now started down the trap-door ladder, grumbling and growling.

"Be careful!" rapidly but pleasantly warned someone whom Mort jostled a few feet from the bottom.

Mort edged over and dropped to the floor. He gave the speaker a keen look.

"Hello! Oh; it's you?" he muttered with a scowl; "Ralph Fairbanks."

The person addressed responded with a short nod. Then he continued to mount the ladder in an easy, agile way.

"Hold on," challenged Bemis.

He had planted his feet apart, and had fixed a fierce and malignant glance upon the newcomer.

Suspicion, disappointment, and rage showed plainly in his coarse, sullen face.

There was something in the striking contrast between himself and the other that galled Mort.

He was "down and out," he realized, while the neat, cheery, ambitious lad whom he had hailed, three years his junior, was "going up the ladder" in more ways than one.

The latter wore a new, clean working suit, and carried a dinner pail. He suggested the wholesome, energetic worker from top to toe.

"I am holding on," he observed to Mort, stopping half-way up the ladder.

"Thought you was working at the roundhouse?" said Mort.

"I was," answered Ralph Fairbanks. "I have been promoted."

"Where to?"

"Here."

"What!" flared out Mort. "What do you know about switch-tower duty?"

"Not much, only what Mr. Knight has shown me for the past two days. But I'll catch on, I guess."

Mort Bemis struck a tragic pose and his voice quavered.

"Oho! that's the game, eh? All cut and dried! My bread and butter taken away from me, to give to one of the master mechanic's pets. Augh!"

Mort retreated with a grimace of disgust. He was standing under a floor grating. Purposely or by accident, Knight, overhead, had dropped a dipperful of water through the grating.

Mort jumped outside the lower tower room, growling like a mad catamount.

He shook his fist menacingly at Ralph.

"Fairbanks," he cried, "I'll fix you for this!"

Ralph did not even look at his enemy again. He completed his ascent of the ladder, and came up through the trap with a bright, cheery hail to old Jack, whom he liked and who liked him.

"I report for active duty, Mr. Knight," he announced briskly.

"Oh, do you?" retorted the old railroader, disguising his good nature under his usual mask of grimness. "Well, you're ahead of time fifteen minutes, so just sit down and behave yourself till I get those freights over yonder untangled. Anxious for work, are you?" he pursued quizzically. "You'll have enough of it. I'm ordered up to the crossings tower, and you'll have to take the first half-night shift here alone. Think you can manage it?"

"I can try, Mr. Knight," was the modest but resolute reply.

CHAPTER II--UP THE LADDER

Ralph Fairbanks was a full-fledged railroader, young as he was.

Those who have read the preceding volume of this series, will have no difficulty in recognizing the able and intrepid hero of "Ralph of the Roundhouse" in the manly young fellow who had just reported for duty to grim old Jack Knight.

Ralph had lived at Stanley Junction since childhood. His father had been a railroad man before him. In fact, John Fairbanks had been instrumental in bringing the Great Northern to Stanley Junction. He had in part supervised its construction.

He had died before reaping the reward of his services. However, Mrs. Fairbanks and his friends knew that he owned some twenty thousand dollars' worth of railroad stock besides his home. This stock could not be located after his death, and Ralph and his mother found themselves totally unprovided for.

They knew that in his stock deals Mr. Fairbanks had a partner. This was Gasper Farrington, a miserly but wealthy magnate of the town.

To their astonishment, this man now came forward with a mortgage on the homestead that Mrs. Fairbanks was positive had been paid off before her husband's death.

Of this, however, she could furnish no written proof. Farrington professed great sympathy for the family of his dead partner, but nevertheless he insisted on collecting the interest on the mortgage.

He seemed very anxious to get the Fairbanks family away from Stanley Junction, and even offered them a bribe to go.

This fact aroused Ralph's suspicions.

He got thinking things over. He suddenly realized what a sacrifice his noble mother was making to keep him at school.

One day he went home with a great resolve in his mind. He announced to his mother that he had decided to put aside boyish sports for hard work.

Ralph was a favorite with local railroaders. The freight yards at Acton caught fire, and Ralph was impressed into temporary service.

The lad's heroic acts won the attention and friendship of the master mechanic of the railroad. Next day Ralph found himself an employee of the Great Northern, as wiper under the foreman of the local roundhouse.

They had offered him a clerical position in the general offices down the line at Springfield, but Ralph declined. He announced his intention of beginning at the very bottom of the railroad ladder and working his way up.

How promptly and triumphantly he reached the first rung, "Ralph of the Roundhouse" has narrated.

It was a hard experience, but he soon won the reputation of turning out the cleanest, brightest locomotives in the service.

Ralph made many friends and some enemies. Among the latter was a dissolute boy named Ike Slump. This young rascal stole nearly a wagon-load of valuable brass fittings from the railroad supply shops, and not a trace of the thief or booty could be discovered by the road detectives.

Ralph had in the meantime befriended and practically adopted a poor waif, named Van Sherwin. The latter had been accidentally struck in the head by a baseball. His reason seemed gone. Ralph's tender-hearted mother cared for him as if he was an only son.

Strange to say, it was through this lone waif whom Ralph had so befriended that the young railroader was led to know a certain Farwell Gibson. This man turned out to be, like Ralph's father, a victim of the wiles of old Gasper Farrington.

Ralph and he got comparing notes. Gibson lived in a lonely stretch of woods. He was day by day doing some grading work, which enabled him to keep alive a legal charter for a cut-off railway line.

He furnished Ralph with the evidence that the mortgage on the Fairbanks

home had been paid.

Incidentally, near the woodland seclusion of Farwell Gibson, Ralph ran across a wrecked wagon in a ravine. In this he discovered the metal fittings stolen from the railroad company.

Ike Slump got away, but Ralph secured the plunder. When he returned to Stanley Junction, through a lawyer he made Gasper Farrington acknowledge the mortgage on their home as invalid, much to the chagrin of the old miser.

He told Farrington, too, that he believed he had his father's twenty thousand dollars' worth of railroad bonds hidden away somewhere, and notified him that he should yet try to unravel the mystery surrounding them.

Ralph now reaped the reward of duty well done. Life grew brighter. They had a home, and Mr. Blake, the master mechanic, showed his appreciation of the recovery of the stolen plunder.

Ralph was officially notified that he was promoted to duty at the depot switch tower.

For two days he had been under the skilled tuition of old Jack Knight, learning the ropes. Now, at the noon hour of a bright, balmy autumn day, he entered upon this second grade of service in the employ of the Great Northern.

It was a pleasure to the ardent young railroader to view the panorama of rails and switches in plain view of the switch tower.

It was a fascinating novelty to study old Jack Knight at the levers. One-handed as he was for the occasion, he went through his duties like some skilled master giving an expert exhibition.

The switch levers were numbered up to twenty. In their center was a dial, a foot across. Over its surface ran an indicator, moved by an electric button one mile south, at the main signal tower at the limits of the town.

"Passenger No. 8," "Freight 10," "Express 3," "Special," "Chaser," and half a dozen other regular trains were marked on this dial.

Nearby was a telephone, also connecting with the limits tower. This was in requisition every minute to announce when trains had passed a certain switch, closed again behind them.

A large megaphone hung in readiness near an open window behind the operator, who darted from lever to lever according as he received his orders by 'phone or dial.

For two days, as Ralph had told Mort Bemis, he had been under the skilled tuition of old Jack, learning the switches.

He had gone down the tracks to the limits, foot by foot slowly, twenty times or more that morning, until he had a perfect map in his head of every rail and switch on the roadbeds.

He had familiarized himself with every lever number, and that of every train

on the road. He realized that trained eye, ear, and muscle must be ever on the alert, or great loss of life and property might result at any moment.

There was a lull in active duty for the veteran towerman as the noon whistles blew. Knight set the lever for a lazy switch engine taking a siding, sent the noon accommodation on her way, closed the switches after her, and gave attention to Ralph.

"Well, Fairbanks," he said, slipping his coat over one arm and changing his cap, "think you can manage?"

"I can obey orders," answered Ralph.

"That's all you have to do. The limits gives you your cue. Never forget that they are the responsible party. If they say six, make it six, if you see that it's going to bust a train of Pullmans, depot, and all. Obey orders--that's the beginning and end. Number two is: Use your own judgment with chasers and freights when the tracks are full."

Just then the telephone bell rang. Ralph grasped the receiver.

"No. 4, express, backing in," and Ralph repeating it casually for old Jack's benefit, stepped on the long, narrow plank lining the lever platform.

"Three for the yards switch, 7 for the in main, and 4 for the express shed siding," he pronounced.

It took some muscle to pull over the big heavy levers in turn, which were not operated on the new-style compressed air system.

Knight watched him closely, nodding his head in approval as Ralph closed the switches on limits' 'phoning as the express passed certain points. As a locomotive backing three express cars passed the tower and took the sheds tracks, old Jack observed:

"You'll do. I'll drop in later. Your shift runs till 9 P.M. Then Doc Bortree will relieve you."

"All right, Mr. Knight. And thanks for all your trouble in teaching me," said Ralph.

The old towerman disappeared down the trap ladder. Ralph did not sit down. He was alone now, and it would take time and experience to dissipate the natural tension of anxiety he felt.

"It's a big responsibility for a boy," he spoke musingly. "They know their business, though," he went on, "and have confidence in me, it seems. Well, I'll make good, if strict obedience to orders is the keynote."

The ensuing hour was a great strain on Ralph's nerves. It was a critical situation, for at one o'clock it seemed as if every switch engine in the service started up simultaneously.

Three freights and one out and one in passenger complicated the situation. Ralph's eye never left the dial. His ear got trained to catching the slightest click

on the telephone.

He felt as flabby as a doormat and was wet with perspiration, as he finally cleared the yards.

"Never a miss!" he panted, with a good deal of satisfaction. "It couldn't come much swifter than that at any hour of the day or night. It's genuine hard work, though, and expert work, too. Well, I've made a fair beginning."

Ralph had it quite easy for an hour now. He rested in the big cane armchair on a little elevated platform directly in front of the levers. From there he had a clear view of every foot of the yards.

Some roundhouse hands, passing by, waved him a genial hail. The depot master strolled by about three o'clock, and called up to know how Knight's hand was getting on. Just after that, Ralph fancied he recognized Mort Bemis in a group of loaferish-looking fellows on the freight tracks. A call to the levers, however, distracted his attention, and when he looked again the coterie had disappeared.

"I'll have a stirring report to make to mother to-night," reflected Ralph, with pleasurable anticipation.

A short freight had just taken the far siding. Its engineer held up two fingers to Ralph. This indicated that he wanted main two. After that his crew set the unattached switches beyond themselves.

The freight was slowing up, when Ralph saw a female form come over the bumpers of two of the moving cars. She leaped to the ground as nimbly as an expert switchman.

The fireman of the freight yelled at her and shook his fist. She tossed her head in the air and proceeded across the planked passenger roadbeds, dodging a hand-car, climbing over a stationary freight, and continuing recklessly across the railroad property where outsiders were not allowed.

She was a somewhat portly, red-faced woman of about forty. She wore a hideous poke bonnet, and carried a bulging umbrella with a heavy hooked handle.

In crossing between the cars she simply reached up with this, encircled the brake-rod with the umbrella handle, and pulled herself to the bumpers.

A flagman came rushing up to her. He pointed to the painted sign on a signal post near by, warning trespassers.

Ralph watched the determined female flare up. The flagman tried to stop her. She knocked off his cap with a sweeping blow of the umbrella, and proceeded calmly on her way with the stride of some amazon.

Ralph was wondering at her temerity and mission. She was headed straight for the switch tower.

Just then the dial clicked. "Chaser" it indicated, and down the main track came a locomotive and tender at full speed.

The 'phone gave the direction: Track 11. This was a set of rails rounding

beyond the blank wall of the in freight on a sharp curve.

It took one lever to set the switch from the main track, another to open the rails inside track eleven.

On the main, forty feet farther on, stood the made-up afternoon accommodation train. On No. 12 were two dead Pullmans, ready for the night express.

The levers of in main and track eleven were less than three feet apart. Ralph grasped one with each hand, to slide the main with his right and complete the switch circuit with his left.

It was an easy task, knowing just what was wanted, and a full thirty seconds to act in.

The minute that Ralph's hands struck the levers, a thrill and then a chill--strong, overpowering, and deadly--paralyzed every nerve in his body.

Every vestige of sensation left his frame--his hands, perfectly nerveless, seemed glued to the levers.

He could not detach them, strive as he might--he could not exert a single ounce of pulling power.

With a gasp Ralph saw the chaser engine dash down the rails, a hundred, eighty, seventy, fifty feet from the main switch, tender in front, so engineer and fireman, relying on the tower service, never noticed that they were headed for a tremendous crash into the made-up accommodation.

With a sickening sense of horror Ralph strove to pull the levers. Impossible!

Something was wrong! He could not move a muscle. Like one petrified he glared down at the flying locomotive, headed straight for disaster and destruction.

CHAPTER III--A CLOSE GRAZE

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Ralph's strained hearing caught these sounds vaguely. All his attention was centered on the locomotive apparently speeding to sure disaster.

The next instant, however, he became aware that in some mysterious way these noises signalized his rescue from a terrible situation.

The lever rods his hands clasped vibrated harshly. As if by magic that glue-like suction tension on his fingers was withdrawn.

His hands still burned and tingled, but a great gasp of relief left his lips. His eyes fixed on the rushing engine, his hands now pulled the levers in order.

Not six inches from taking the in main rails, not eight seconds from reducing the accommodation to a heap of kindling wood, the "chaser" shot switch eleven, and glided smoothly to the terminus. Its serene crew never dreamed how they had grazed death by a hair's breadth.

Ralph half fell between the levers. He felt that his face must be the color of chalk. His strength was entirely spent. He still grasped the levers, hanging there for a moment like a person about to faint.

Fortunately there was no call for switch-tower service during the ensuing minute or two. Ralph tried to rally his dazed senses, to comprehend what was going on below.

For again a swishing, cracking, clattering sound rang out. This time it was followed by a curdling cry of pain.

"You'll blind me--you're tearing my hair out by the roots!" screamed a voice which Ralph instantly recognized.

It belonged to Mort Bemis. Ralph began to have a coherent suspicion as to the cause of his recent helplessness.

"I'll tear twenty-six dollars out of you, or I'll have your hide!" proclaimed strident feminine tones.

"I hain't got no money."

"You'll get it for me. What, strike me with that piece of wire! You wretch, I'll----"

There was a jangling crash, as of some heavy body thrown back against the lever cables in the lower story of the switch tower.

Then its door crashed open, and glancing through the windows Ralph saw Mort Bemis dash into view.

He sped across tracks as if for his life. He was hatless, his face was streaked with red welts. From one hand trailed a piece of insulated electric light wire.

Giving a frightened backward glance as he reached a line of freights, the ex-towerman leaped the space between two cars and disappeared from view.

From the lower story of the switch tower there now issued exclamations of rage and disgust.

Ralph started to look down the ladder trap. Just then the dial called for a switch, and duty temporarily curbed his interest and curiosity. As he set clear tracks again, a head obtruded through the trapdoor.

It was that of the resolute woman Ralph had noticed a little time past so audaciously crossing the rails and defying instructions. Her face was red and

heated, her eyes flashing. Her hair was in disorder, and the poke bonnet was all awry.

"Be careful--don't fall, madam," said Ralph quickly, with inborn chivalry and politeness, springing to the trap.

He put out a hand to help her. She disdained his assistance with an impatient sniff, and cleared the ladder like an expert.

"Don't trouble yourself about me, young man," she observed crisply. "I'm able to take care of myself."

"I see you are, madam."

"I've run an ore dummy in my time, when my husband was head yardman at an iron works, and I know how to climb. See here," she demanded imperatively, fixing a keen look on the young railroader, "are you boss here?"

"Why, you might say so," answered Ralph. "That is, I am in charge here."

The woman put down her umbrella to adjust her bonnet. Ralph observed that the umbrella was in tatters and the ribs all broken and twisted. He comprehended that it was with this weapon that she had just assaulted Mort Bemis.

"If you're the boss," pursued the woman, "I'm Mrs. Davis--Mort Bemis' landlady, and I want to know what I've got to do to get twenty-six dollars thet he owes me for board and lodging for the last six weeks."

"I see," nodded Ralph--"slow pay, that fellow."

"No pay at all!" flashed out the woman wrathfully. "He came to me month before last with a great story of promotion, big salary, and all his back funds tied up in a savings bank at Springfield. Last pay day he claimed someone robbed him. This pay day he dropped from the garret window, leaving an old empty trunk. I got on his trail to-day, and I want to garnishee his wages. How do I go about it?"

"I don't know the process," said Ralph, "never having had any experience in that class of business, but I should say garnisheeing in this case would simply be sending good money after bad."

"How?" demanded Mrs. Davis sharply.

"Bemis has very likely drawn every cent the company owes him."

"But his pay is running on."

"Not now, madam. He was discharged two days ago."

"W-what!" voiced Mrs. Davis, in dismay. "And won't he be taken back?"

"From what I hear--hardly," said Ralph.

The woman's strong, weather-beaten features relaxed. All her impetuosity seemed to die out with her hope. Ralph felt sorry for her. She was brusque and harsh of manner, masculine in her ways, but the womanly helplessness now exhibited was pathetic.

She tottered back to the armchair, every vestige of willfulness and force gone. Apparently this odd creature never did things by halves. She sunk down

in the chair, and began to cry as if her heart would break. Ralph was called back to the levers and had no time to console her. He watched her pityingly, however. Between her sobbings and incoherent lamentations he pretty clearly made out the history of her present woes.

Mort Bemis had, it seemed, shown himself a "dead beat of the first water." Mrs. Davis had recently come to Stanley Junction, and had rented an old house near a factory owned by Gasper Farrington.

Bemis had applied for board and lodging. With what he promised to pay, and with what she could make off an orchard, vegetable patch, and some poultry, this would give Mrs. Davis a fair living.

"And he never paid me a cent," she sobbed out. "Last Saturday my last cent went for flour. Yesterday I used up the last bread in the house. I haven't eaten a morsel this blessed day. The man who owns the house threatens to turn me out if I don't pay the six dollars rent by six o'clock to-night, and all for that rascally, thieving Bemis! A full-grown man, and robbing and cheating a poor lone widow like me!"

Ralph glanced up and down the rails. Then he glided over to the clothes closet at the end of the tower room and secured his dinner pail.

"And what was the scoundrel up to below, when I discovered him just now, I'd like to know?" went on Mrs. Davis. "Some dirty mischief, I'll be bound. He had a wire fixed around a bigger one, and was holding the scraped copper ends against the lever cables till they sparked out little flashes of fire. Say, can't he be arrested for swindling me? The reprobate deserves to suffer."

Ralph gave a little start of comprehension just there. The woman's last recital had cleared up the mystery of his recent sudden helplessness.

There was no doubt whatever in his mind but that the revengeful Mort Bemis had started in to "fix" him, as he had threatened earlier in the day. His knowledge of the details and environment of the switch tower had enabled him to work out a well-devised scheme.

Ralph knew that Bemis was determined to undermine and discredit him at any cost.

He theorized that in some way Bemis had connected the current from the wires that looped up from the road boxes into the tower. He had the practiced eye to know what levers Ralph would use. Bemis had thrown on the current, magnetizing the new leverman at just the critical moment.

But for the providential intervention of Mrs. Davis a destructive collision would have occurred, Ralph would have been disgraced, and there would have been a vacancy at the switch tower.

"The villain!" breathed Ralph, all afire with indignation, and then his glance softened as he turned to the woman seated in the armchair. Her grief had spent

itself, but she sat with her chin sunk in one hand, moping dejectedly.

There was a short bench near one of the windows. Ralph pulled this up in front of the armchair. He opened his lunch pail and spread out a napkin on the bench. Then on this he placed two home-made sandwiches, a piece of apple pie, and a square of the raisin cake that had made his mother famous as a first-class cook.

All this Ralph did so quickly that Mrs. Davis, absorbed in her gloomy thoughts, did not notice him. He touched her arm gently.

"I want you to sample my mother's cooking, Mrs. Davis," he said, with a pleasant smile. "You will feel better if you eat a little, and I want to tell you something."

"Well, well! did you ever?" exclaimed Mrs. Davis, noting now the sudden transformation of the bench into a lunch table. "Why, boy," she continued, with a keen stare at Ralph, "I can't take your victuals away from you."

"But you must eat," insisted Ralph. "I had a hearty dinner, and have a warm supper waiting for me soon after dark. I brought the dinner pail along just as a matter of form in a way, see."

"Yes, I do see," answered his visitor, with a gulp, and new tears in her eyes--"I see you are a good boy, and a blessing to a good mother, I'll warrant."

"You are right about the good mother, Mrs. Davis," said Ralph, "and I want you to go and see her, to judge for yourself."

Mrs. Davis munched a sandwich. She looked flustered at Ralph's suggestion.

"I'm hardly in a position to make calls--I'm dreadfully poor and humble just now," she said in a broken tone.

"Well," repeated Ralph decisively, "you must call on my mother this afternoon. You see, Mrs. Davis, that rent of yours has got to be paid by six o'clock, hasn't it?"

"The landlord said so."

"I have only a dollar or so in my pocket here," continued Ralph, "but my mother has some of my savings up at the house. I want to let you have ten dollars. I will write a note to my mother, and she will let you have it."

Mrs. Davis let the sandwich she was eating fall nervelessly to the napkin.

"What--what are you saying!" she spoke, staring in perplexity at Ralph.

"Why, you must pay your rent, you know," said Ralph, "and you need a little surplus till you get on your feet again. There may be some way of shaming or forcing Mort Bemis into paying that twenty-six dollars. If there is, I will discover it for you."

"But--but you don't know me. I'm a stranger to you. I couldn't take money from a boy like you, working hard as you must, probably for little enough wages," vociferated Mrs. Davis, strangely stirred up by the generous proffer. "I might

take a loan from somebody able to spare the money, for I can write to a sister at a distance and get a trifle, and pay it back again, but not from you. No--no, thank you just the same--just the same," and the woman broke down completely, crying again.

Ralph sprang to the levers at a new switch call. Then he resumed his argument.

"Mrs. Davis, you shall take the ten dollars, and you shall have twenty if you need it, and that is an end to it. First: because you are in distress and I have it to spare. Next: because I owe you a debt money cannot pay."

"Nonsense, boy," spoke Mrs. Davis dubiously.

"It's true. You don't happen to know it, but you have saved my position and my character this afternoon. You have probably saved the railroad company great loss of property, if not of life itself. I should be a grateful boy to you, Mrs. Davis. Let me tell you why."

Ralph did tell her. He recited the story of the last hour at the levers. Before she could make a comment at its termination, he had written and thrust into her hand a note addressed to his mother.

"I'll take the ten dollars," said Mrs. Davis, in a subdued tone, after he had directed her to his home, "but only as a loan. You shall have it back quick as I can get word from my sister."

"As you like about that," answered Ralph. "I hope you will make a friend of my mother," he added. "She has had her troubles, and you would be the happier for asking her counsel."

"Yes, I've had a heap of troubles, boy," sighed Mrs. Davis. "Oh, dear! I may be a little good in the world, after all. And," with a wistful look at Ralph, "it's hopeful to think all boys aren't like bad Mort Bemis. And here I'm borrowing money from you, and don't even know your name."

She groped in a pocket and drew forth a worn memorandum book and a pencil. Then, opening the book at a blank page, she looked up inquiringly at Ralph.

"Fairbanks," dictated Ralph.

Mrs. Davis had placed the pencil point on the blank page, ready to write. As Ralph spoke her hand seemed swayed by a great shock.

The pencil and book were nervelessly dropped to the floor. She turned a colorless face towards Ralph, and, shrinking back in the creaking armchair, stared at him so strangely and fixedly that he was unable to understand her sudden emotion.

CHAPTER IV--A MYSTERY

Ralph looked at his switch-tower visitor in great surprise.

"Why, Mrs. Davis," he asked, "what is the matter?"

"N--nothing," she stammered, trying to control herself, but her features were working strangely. "So your name is Fairbanks?"

"Yes, Mrs. Davis."

"Not John Fairbanks--how simple I am, though, of course not. He was an old man. Are you his son, then?"

"Yes," answered Ralph, his curiosity excited. "My name is Ralph. I am John Fairbanks' son. He is dead, you know. Were you acquainted with him?"

"Not acquainted exactly," replied the woman, in a certain repressed way. "I have heard of him, you see."

"Oh, you mean since you came to Stanley Junction?"

"No, no, a long way from here, and a long time ago. Where I used to live. I heard he was dead, and I heard you and your mother was dead, too. I did not dream that any of the Fairbanks were here now."

"Why, you amaze me!" cried Ralph. "Who could have told you that?"

"A certain man. He told a falsehood, didn't he? I might have known it. I see now--yes, I begin to see how things are."

She said this in a musing tone, as if half-forgetting that she had an auditor. Ralph was more than interested. He was startled. He knew enough of human nature to guess that Mrs. Davis was concealing something from him.

She arose quite flustered, and began to arrange her bonnet. She evaded Ralph's eye, and appeared anxious to get away. Ralph determined to press some further inquiries. Before he could begin, she made the remark:

"You are a good boy, Ralph Fairbanks, and I shan't forget you. I will take the loan you offer me, but it will be promptly paid back, very soon. Boy," she continued, with a good deal of animation, as if suddenly stirred by some impulsive thought, "you will get a blessing for being good to a poor lone widow, see if you don't."

"I seem to be getting blessings all the time," said Ralph lightly, but reverently. "I guess life is full of them, if you do right and put yourself in the way of them. Is there some special blessing you are thinking of, Mrs. Davis?" he inquired, saying the words because the woman had used a certain significant, mysterious tone in her last statement. This made him believe she could be clearer and say a deal more, if she chose to do so.

"Yes, there is," replied Mrs. Davis, almost excitedly. "You mustn't question me, though, boy--not just now, anyway. You have given me a lot to think of. I may tell you something very important later on--I may tell your mother to-day. Good-by."

As she approached the trap in the floor, Ralph got a call for a switch. He was reluctant to let his visitor depart. Her vague revelations disturbed him. When he had attended to the levers, he turned again to Mrs. Davis. In doing so he chanced to glance down at the near tracks, and fixedly regarded two approaching figures.

"Hello," he spoke irrepressibly, aloud. "Coming here--the master mechanic and Gasper Farrington."

"What's that--who?" cried Mrs. Davis, almost in a shout.

Ralph looked at her in new amazement. As she had caught the last name he had spoken, she stood erect in a strained, tense way, seeming to be frightened.

The two men Ralph had indicated now crossed the tracks and entered the switch tower below. Their voices could be heard distinctly.

"We have a switch plan upstairs in the tower, Mr. Farrington," sounded the clear, incisive tones of Mr. Blake, the master mechanic of the Great Northern.

"All right," answered his companion, and the accents of his voice seemed to be familiar to Mrs. Davis. She looked almost terrified. She glanced wildly around the tower room.

"Hide me!" she gasped appealingly to Ralph.

"Why, what for?" he inquired.

"It's Gasper Farrington, isn't it, just as you said? And he is coming up here!"

"It seems that he is, Mrs. Davis," responded Ralph.

"I don't want to meet him. I don't want him to see me--not yet," went on the woman rapidly.

"Are you afraid of Gasper Farrington, Mrs. Davis?" asked Ralph pointedly.

But she did not answer him. She glided to the coat closet at the end of the room, as if seeking a hiding-place. As she pulled its door open, she noticed that it was too shallow to admit a human form.

The dial again called Ralph. By the time he had attended to the levers, he noticed that Mrs. Davis had produced a thick heavy veil and was concealing her face under it. She stood fidgeting nervously at a window at the far end of the room, her back turned to the trapdoor, as if to escape direct attention.

The master mechanic came into view. Then he helped his companion into the room.

Ralph caught his breath quickly and his lips compressed a trifle, as he recognized Gasper Farrington.

His advent was a certain new cause of some inquietude to the young leverman. An old-time enemy, and a bitter and crafty one, Ralph knew he could never expect any good from the miserly old magnate of Stanley Junction.

Farrington's wealth and position gave him a certain influence and power that had been repeatedly used to crush those he did not like. He disliked the Fairbanks family for more reasons than one, and he had tried to crush Ralph more than once. In these efforts, however, he had failed. Ralph had come off the victor because he was in the right, which always prevails, sooner or later.

In their last encounter, Ralph had forced the scheming Farrington to release the fraudulent mortgage he held on the Fairbanks cottage. He had bargained to keep the humiliating details of Farrington's swindling operations secret as long as the defeated magnate let them alone. He did not think that Farrington would now risk public exposure by attempting any further tricky measures of gain or revenge. Still, Ralph disliked coming in contact with the man, who would willingly do him an injury and gloat over his downfall.

He was glad that Farrington did not notice him. The attention of the magnate was at once directed to a blue-print plan nailed between two windows.

"There is the switch plan of the yards, Mr. Farrington," said the master mechanic, indicating the sheet of paper in question.

Mr. Blake nodded to Ralph. Then he looked inquiringly at Mrs. Davis.

"A lady who was looking for Mort Bemis," explained Ralph. "He owes her some money, it seems."

"He owes about everybody he can work," said the master mechanic brusquely, and crossed the room after Farrington.

Mrs. Davis quickly went to the trap. She kept her eye on Gasper Farrington until safely down on the ladder, placed her finger on her lips in significant adieu to Ralph, and then disappeared.

The latter stood at the levers, his back turned purposely on the newcomers into the switch tower.

There was no need of his having an encounter with Farrington, if it could be avoided. Ralph attended to his duties strictly. However, he could not help overhearing what the two men at the side of the room were saying.

Ralph soon divined the nature of Farrington's visit to the switch tower. The magnate owned a factory building about half a mile from the railroad. It had stood vacant and abandoned for some time, as Ralph knew. Now, it seemed, a manufacturer had agreed to lease it for a term of years, provided he could have

direct railroad transportation facilities put in.

This point the two men at the switch plan were now discussing. Farrington was following the finger of the master mechanic, as it moved along over the traceries of white and red ink that crisscrossed the blue print.

"Here is where you start your spur," Mr. Blake was explaining. "We can put you in a single track, you to bear half the expense."

"You mean one-third," interrupted the bargaining old schemer.

"I mean just what I said," observed the master mechanic grimly. "It is a long reach for a siding, you have no right of way, and we are supplying it, although we will have to run a pretty steep grade down the ravine, for that is the only land we own in your direction. We have right of way to within three hundred feet of your factory. As to the strip that intervenes----"

"Oh, there's nothing there but an old shanty on leasehold," answered Farrington.

"Can you get permission to cross it?" asked Blake.

"He! he!" chuckled Farrington; "can I get it? I'll take it!"

"Well, that is your own matter," spoke Blake. "All we want is a bond guarantee for five years, that you will run enough freight over the spur to equal a ten per cent. annual investment."

"Isn't my word good enough for that?" demanded Farrington arrogantly.

"The Great Northern takes no man's word where a contract is concerned," was the definite answer.

"All right, close the matter up as soon as you like," said Farrington. "Here's where you control the switches, eh?" he continued, leaving the plat and taking a curious glance about the tower.

"Yes."

"I should say it took a clear head and lots of experience to avoid mistakes."

"It does, and lots of muscle, too--eh, Fairbanks?" spoke the master mechanic.

Ralph nodded. He aimed to escape recognition at the hands of Farrington, who, in another minute, would have left the place. He knew, however, that he was discovered, as the magnate uttered a short, sharp grunt.

CHAPTER V--THE STOWAWAY

"What's that?" called out Gasper Farrington, hobbling up to the levers and staring at Ralph. "Look here, Mr. Blake," he pursued, his brows drawn in a mean, savage scowl. "You don't mean to tell me this boy has anything to do with your switching?"

"He has everything to do with it," announced the master mechanic, looking as if he was disposed to resent the manner and words of the client he did not like any too well himself.

"Well, then, it won't do!" snarled Farrington, getting excited. "I want trustworthy service, I do. I don't propose to run the risk of damage and loss with a road that hires kids for its most important work."

Mr. Blake's lips drew tightly together. Then he remarked:

"Mr. Farrington, the Great Northern knows its business distinctly, we are responsible for any damage caused by the negligence or inability of our employees. In this instance you may quiet your needless fears. Mr. Fairbanks thoroughly understands his business, and I personally recommended him to his present position on account of the cleanest record and best practical ability of any junior employee of the company."

"H'm. Ha! That so?" mumbled Farrington, taken a good deal aback by Blake's definite expressions of approval, while Ralph felt his heart beat with pleasure, and blushed hotly. "All right. I suppose you think you know your business. Only--he was a barefooted urchin six months ago."

"He has earned a good many pairs of shoes since then," observed Blake crisply.

Ralph said not a word. A spell of silence ensued. Farrington stood like some baffled hyena held back from its prey. Ralph quickly and deftly attended to the call for several switches, with a precision and system that even interested the master mechanic.

"It strikes me he'll do," spoke Blake, and Ralph looked grateful as the master mechanic plainly evidenced a pride in the demonstrated ability of his young protégé.

All this roused the vengeful, malignant Farrington to the verge of impotent fury.

"Ah," he growled, "favor cheap help, I suppose? All right. Though be sure to make it your business if any damage comes, that's all. That boy owes me a grudge, and if I know anything of human nature, there will be a wreck on the factory spur before it's been running long."

Ralph felt his fingers tingle. He decided that he had a right to speak now. He faced about squarely. The mean-eyed magnate quailed at the honest indignation of his glance.

"Mr. Farrington," said Ralph, "have I ever sought to do you an injury?"

"Yes--no--perhaps not," stammered Farrington, "but you would like to."

"Why?" demanded Ralph definitely.

"Because--because--oh, I know you. I know the whole brood. You smashed a window in my factory, once."

"Accidentally. And paid for it. Is that true?"

Farrington squirmed. He wanted to back out. He found that he could not domineer in the present instance. More than that, he realized that he dared not. The master mechanic, with a grim smile on his lip, helped him out of the dilemma.

"Come, Mr. Farrington," he said, smartly clicking his watch and helping him through the trap. "We will miss the superintendent, and you say you want to close up this business to-day. Careful, take it a rung at a time--you skunk!" he concluded in an undertone to Ralph, giving him a significant look, and meaning the words for Ralph's ear only.

Ralph felt as if the air was cleared of some violent poison at the departure of this miserable apology of a man.

"Faugh! I won't think of him," he soliloquized. "What possible happiness in life can such people have? I wonder which is the worst: Mort Bemis, poor and mean, or Gasper Farrington, rich and mean. Which carries out what mother has often said: 'Money is not everything.'"

Ralph dismissed his enemies from his mind, whistling cheerily at his tasks. He thought a good deal about Mrs. Davis. He was anxious to get through work and hurry home, to learn if she had called on his mother, and if she had imparted to Mrs. Fairbanks any explanation of her strange acquaintance with his dead father, and of her still more strange fear of Gasper Farrington.

From five until seven o'clock the tracks were kept pretty full. Ralph had a busy time of it. He got through without a delay or a mix-up, however. Jack Knight came up the ladder about eight o'clock.

He looked pleased at the collected, business-like way that Ralph handled things. He finally remarked:

"Met Blake a bit back, Fairbanks."

"The master mechanic--yes," nodded Ralph.

"Keep it under your hat, now," continued Knight significantly. "Blake was riled. He said he'd give half a month's salary to wallop one man in Stanley Junction, if it wasn't business policy to keep down personal feelings for the good of the service."

"Who was the man, Mr. Knight?"

"He didn't say, but no friend of yours, it seems. The gist of it is, that this man--I'd like a crack at him myself--offered Blake two hundred dollars to get you shifted onto some other section."

"I seem to come high," smiled Ralph, although he experienced a faint uneasiness at mind, as he clearly comprehended that Gasper Farrington was up to some of his old underhanded tricks.

"Well, Blake politely turned down the offer. He said to me, though, that if any treachery or influence got you the jacket in this position, if he had to fire every other man along the line, he'd find a place for you in the train dispatcher's office at double pay."

"He is a good friend," said Ralph, with emotion--"and you, too, for giving me the warning, Mr. Knight. Knowing what I do, though, I think I can take care of myself. I do not believe the man you refer to will succeed in disturbing me here."

"He won't, if I can help it," muttered old Jack doughtily.

"Hello, there!" hailed Doc Bortree, the nightshift man, intruding his bulky form and big, jolly face through the trap.

Bortree was a general favorite. He carried an atmosphere of good nature always along with him.

"Well, kid," he hailed. "Busted anything to-day?"

"Not yet," answered Ralph gayly.

They sent him home forthwith. Ralph felt very happy as he descended the ladder from his first real day's service at the switch tower.

His work had gone smoothly, and he loved it. A spice of new interest had been injected into his personal affairs that day, and his mental conjectures were not unpleasant ones.

"I wonder if Mrs. Davis saw mother?" he mused, as he crossed the tracks, homeward bound. "Hello, a stowaway!"

Ralph halted, just passing a line of delayed freights. A great thumping was going on at the side door of the end car.

"Someone in there, sure," soliloquized Ralph.

"A tramp, I suppose. Stowed in at some point, and side-tracked here this

morning. Out with you, whoever you are!" ordered Ralph, unbolting and sliding back the door.

In the dim light of a distant arc lamp Ralph made out a forlorn figure. The stowaway was shabby and peaked-looking, holding in one hand a piece of wood with which he had been hammering for release.

His face was so grimed that Ralph took him for a negro at first. Always kind-hearted, the young leverman had not hesitated to give the stowaway prompt liberty, and it was in his mind to help him farther if necessary.

The stowaway glanced all about the yards as if fearing the gauntlet of cuffs and kicks often in vogue for his class. Then, rubbing his eyes to clear the glare of sudden light, he looked sharply at Ralph.

"Hello," he exclaimed, shooting back out of view. "It's Fairbanks!"

"What's that?" cried Ralph, catching the name in wonderment. "Here, who are you? Do you know me?"

Suddenly as the figure had vanished within the dark car, it now reappeared. With a spring the stowaway cleared the doorway of the car, landing on the cinders beside Ralph.

"Take that!" he hissed, savagely whirling the club above his head.

Ralph dodged. Mystified and unprepared, however, his usual agility was at fault.

A heavy blow landed on the side of his head, and Ralph fell flat.

CHAPTER VI--MRS. FAIRBANKS' VISITOR

It seemed to Ralph that his eyes closed tight shut for half a minute, and then came open as wide as ever.

He did not believe he lost consciousness for more than thirty seconds. That, however, was time enough for his mysterious assailant to make himself scarce.

Ralph got to his feet, quite shaken. His hand went to the side of his head involuntarily. His left cheek was scraped and full of splinters, though not bleeding. A big lump was rising in front of one ear.

On the ground lay the club that had dealt Ralph the blow. He moved it with his foot to find it heavy, as if made of hard wood.

"Why, the fellow might have killed me had he struck a little harder," said Ralph seriously. "Who was he? It must be that he knows me, for he spoke my name."

There was a hydrant in the center of a platform space near by. Ralph went over to this and turned on the water and sopped his handkerchief, applying it to the lump on his head.

"Was it Mort Bemis?" his mind ran on. "No, I am sure it was not. Bemis is stubby and broad, this fellow was tall and slim. Looked like a half-starved rat. Who could it be?"

In a minute or two Ralph went back to the car that had proven for him a kind of Pandora's box.

He lifted himself through the open doorway and flashed some matches.

The car was bare. It smelted of tobacco smoke, and there was a litter of cigarette stubs in one corner. The other closed door was back-sheathed with smooth boards. Under these Ralph discovered some fresh whittlings, or splinters. He inspected door and floor more closely.

"Ah, I see," he observed: "the stowaway has been killing time by cutting his name on the pillar of fame."

The door surface bore a record of various jackknife experts. Idle hands, belonging to all kinds of ride-stealers, had from time to time cut their initials on the smooth boards.

There were some pencilings, too--all kinds of doggerel slang and initials. Thus: "Turnpike Tim on his fift' trip sout'." "Mugsey, the Terror," and the warning line: "Bad road for tramps, twice for flipping trains."

The last stowaway, as evidenced by two letters cut into the board, had sought to rival his predecessors. The newly indented initials were nearly eight inches long, and formed an I and an S.

"'I.S.,'" read Ralph. "The solution is easy. It was Ike Slump. Those are his initials, and, come to recall my fierce assailant, he fits Ike's size exactly. That mean attack, too, would be characteristic of Slump. He was afraid of me. He needs to be. There is a standing reward of twenty-five dollars from the railroad for his arrest. I don't want the reward, but I don't propose to have him come back to his old haunts and associates to bother me."

Ralph walked home slowly. The blow he had received caused him some pain. The addition of the malignant Ike Slump to the list of his active enemies troubled him. Ralph knew what it was to fight a mean, underhanded foe. The roster so far included not only Slump, but Bemis and Gasper Farrington.

"It's my duty to notify the railroad company that Slump is again on hand,"

declared Ralph. "That will dispose of him. As to Bemis, I shall seek him out and give him a warning. If he troubles me any further I will have him arrested for his malicious mischief of to-day. It would be a pretty serious charge--endangering the railroad property. Gasper Farrington will not do anything openly to harm me. He dare not. But he will work against me in the dark, if he sees the chance to do it. Well, I shall watch his movements mighty closely."

Ralph spurred up as he came within the lights of home. The lamp burning brightly in the front room of the neat little cottage was always a cheering beacon to him, for he knew it had been placed by loving hands.

Mrs. Fairbanks, the tender, thoughtful mother, made that home a peaceful paradise for her only son. She greeted Ralph at the door with a welcome that made him forget instantly all of the cares and troubles of the day in entering the sheltering of a rare haven of rest and contentment.

Ralph took a good wash at the kitchen sink, put on a clean collar and tie and a light housecoat. Then he sat down to a table steaming with appetizing food.

"Why, Ralph," instantly spoke Mrs. Fairbanks, "you have been hurt!"

Ralph carelessly moved his hand over the lump on his head.

"Nothing serious, mother," he declared with a reassuring smile. "A fellow generally gets some initiation bumps on his first day in a new job on the railroad."

Mrs. Fairbanks was scarcely satisfied with this off-hand explanation, but Ralph at once shifted the conversation into other channels. He made up his mind he would not worry his mother with the story of his encounter with Ike Slump, at least for the present.

"By the way," he said, as he stowed away a hearty meal, "did you have a visitor to-day, mother?"

"Why, yes," answered Mrs. Fairbanks. "A lady--Mrs. Davis."

"I am glad she came," said Ralph. "She took the ten dollars I wrote you about?"

"Rather reluctantly. She is a strange woman," went on Mrs. Fairbanks thoughtfully; "I could not quite make her out. She acted quite flighty at times, but I believe she is honest, and very earnest in her gratitude and good intentions towards you."

"Why, yes," answered Ralph, with a suggestive smile. "She promised me a blessing. Have you any idea of what she was driving at?" he questioned, scanning his mother's face closely, for he observed that it bore a vague, disturbed expression.

"I think I have, Ralph. It appears that she knew--or at least knew about--your father, some years ago."

"She told me that."

"And she knows Gasper Farrington. She asked me a queer question, Ralph."

"What was it, mother?"

"If father did not once own twenty thousand dollars in railroad bonds, and if we had ever got them."

Ralph stopped eating for a moment.

"She said that, did she?" he murmured. "Mother, wouldn't it be strange if she knew something about those bonds?"

"She does."

"How do you know?"

"Because she admitted it. Mrs. Davis was very much agitated. She seemed on the point constantly of telling me something, and then she would mutter to herself and apparently change her mind. When she went away she looked at me very strangely and said: 'Mrs. Fairbanks, when I get the money from my sister to pay your son back the ten dollars he has so kindly loaned me, I am going to tell him a little story about those twenty thousand dollars bonds that may interest him.'"

The bonds formed the topic of conversation for mother and son for nearly an hour after that. They could only surmise and anticipate, but both were very much stirred up.

"I tell you, mother," said Ralph emphatically, "that woman knows something of importance to us about those bonds. You and I and others have never doubted that Gasper Farrington stole them from father. I have never given up the idea that some day I would reach the truth, and force Farrington to disgorge, just as we made him release the fraudulent mortgage. I really believe things are going to turn so as get us our full rights."

"We will hope so, Ralph," said the widow, with a dubious sigh. "And now tell me all about your first day in the switch tower."

Ralph went to bed about eleven o'clock. He had a good sleep until eight in the morning, devoted an hour or two to tidying up the yard and assisting his mother in various ways, and at noon started for work again.

Old Jack Knight was on duty, and spelled Ralph at the levers until about four o'clock. No unusual incident disturbed the usual routine until an hour later.

In starting to give a switch engine the siding, Ralph found the lever would not budge. The locomotive engineer discovered the unset switch in time to stop. Ralph megaphoned to hold stationary till he investigated, and ran down the ladder.

He found the lever cables chained to a wall bracket. Of course here was some more spite work. He removed the obstruction, hurried upstairs, switched the delayed engine, and kept an eye out for the watchman who covered that part of the yards.

When he finally appeared in view, Ralph hailed him and asked him to come

inside the tower.

"Mr. Brady," he explained, "I wish you would keep a close eye on the lower story here for a day or two."

"Why, what's wrong?" inquired the watchman.

"Well, someone is up to dirty work," replied Ralph. "They tried to put two levers out of commission yesterday, and just now I found another lever chained up."

The watchman looked startled, and whistled under his breath.

"That's pretty serious," he remarked.

"It is," responded Ralph. "I wish you would keep a watch on strangers."

"And discharged employees?" interrogated the watchman, with a shrewd nod. "I think I know what's up, and who is up to it."

Ralph felt certain that Mort Bemis was back of the last attempt to cripple his usefulness. He did not, however, believe that Bemis himself had chained the lever, for he had kept a pretty close watch of the yards all afternoon, and had seen nothing of the discharged leverman. Ralph theorized that Bemis had put some associate up to the trick. It was an easy matter for any passer-by to step into the lower story of the switch tower without being seen from above. Ralph made up his mind he would seek out Bemis. When he was relieved after dark he did not go home. He had made some inquiries of Knight as to the present whereabouts and haunts of Mort Bemis, and Ralph thought he knew where to look for the fellow.

CHAPTER VII--"YOUNG SLAVIN"

Railroad Street to the right of Stanley Junction was a busy, respectable thoroughfare. There were a hotel, some restaurants, a store or two, and beyond these some old residences.

To the left, however, the street retrograded into second-hand stores, junk-shops, and the like, cheap eating places and boarding-houses, with a mixture of saloons.

The lower class of railroad employees and the scum of the Junction usually infested these places. At a restaurant called "The Signal" Ralph, from what he learned that day, felt he was pretty sure to get some trace of Mort Bemis.

He went by the place slowly once or twice, but could not discover Bemis in the crowded front room.

Then he paced down the alley at the side of the building. Several lower-story apartments showed lighted up. He approached the open window of one of these.

As he did so, he noticed that directly under it lay some person asleep, rolled up in horse-blankets. Ralph nearly stumbled over this individual.

He glanced into the room beyond the window. It held a table, at which was seated the object of his search.

Mort Bemis was idly pawing over a greasy deck of playing cards. He seemed to be awaiting the arrival of congenial company. Tilted back in a chair against the wall near by, a skullcap pulled down over his eyes and seemingly asleep, was a person Ralph did not recognize.

Ralph now stepped cautiously over the sleeper at his feet so as not to disturb him, and went around to the front of the restaurant.

It was run by a man named Prince, who at one time had conducted eating camps for railroad construction crews. He kept lodgers upstairs, and derived a good deal of revenue by letting out the rear rooms of the lower floor to card-players.

Ralph entered the restaurant and passed through a curtained doorway at one side. Prince, at the cashier's desk, gave him a keen look, but took him for some new recruit to the crowd who infested the rear rooms.

A narrow passageway led the length of the rear addition. Ralph turned the knob of the second door he reached. He found he had correctly located the apartment he had viewed from the alley.

Mort Bemis looked up as Ralph closed the door behind him. He started and stared. Ralph came around to the table, sank into the chair directly opposite Bemis, and looked him squarely in the face.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Bemis a surly, suspicious expression crossing his features.

"I came particularly to see you," answered Ralph calmly. "Can I have your attention for a minute or two?"

"Just two of them," growled Bemis.

Ralph did not scare at the bullying, significant manner of the discharged leverman.

"It's just this," he said bluntly: "you visited the switch tower yesterday and came very nearly causing a bad wreck."

"Who told you so?" demanded Bemis.

"Oh, there are plenty of witnesses, your former landlady, for one. Another low-down trick was attempted this afternoon, instigated, I believe, by you. Now, Mr. Bemis, this has come to a dead-open-and-shut conclusion."

"Has it? How?" sneered Mort.

"I have legitimately succeeded to your position, and I intend to hold it. You seem resolved to discredit and disgrace me. It won't work. If you make one more break in my direction, I shall go to the superintendent of the Great Northern, make a formal complaint of malicious mischief, and then enter a regular complaint with the police."

Mort Bemis did not reply. His bluff was gone, for he knew that Ralph meant every word that he said.

"There's another thing," pursued Ralph: "you owe a poor widow money that she needs, and needs badly. If you have any sense of shame or honor in your nature, you will find honest work and pay her."

"I don't want none of your advice!" flared out Bemis. "You've said your say! Then get out. I'll keep hands off because I don't fancy being locked up, but," he added with a malicious grin, "I can't hold back my friends from doing what they like."

"You have had your warning," said Ralph quietly, rising to his feet. "I've given you your chance. Leave my affairs alone, if you are wise."

Ralph started for the door. Suddenly his way was blocked. The person he had supposed to be asleep, tilted back against the wall in a chair, had roused up with marvelous quickness.

As this individual threw back his skullcap, he revealed the coarse, bloated face of a boy about two years Ralph's senior. He was a powerfully-built fellow. Ralph remembered having seen him once in the hands of the police after a raid on a chicken fight at the fair grounds.

"Easy," spoke this person, springing between Ralph and the door, and doubling up his fists pugilist-fashion. "This gent is my friend, and you've insulted him."

"I think not," said Ralph calmly.

"Do all your thinking quick, then," advised the other, "for I want satisfaction."

The speaker drove at Ralph with one hand. It was a sledge-hammer blow. Ralph whirled half-way across the room.

His antagonist followed him up quickly. His back now to the window, he put up his fists anew.

"I wanted some training," he chuckled. "Come up to your punishment. Do you know who I am?"

"I do not, and don't care," answered Ralph quickly, nettled out of his ordinary

composure by a blow that had nearly knocked the breath out of his body.

"Then you can't read the newspapers. I'm Young Slavin, the juvenile Hercules, light-weight champeen. Come, wade in; I give you one chanct."

"I have no quarrel with you," remarked Ralph. "Stand aside. I wish to leave this room."

"Ho! ho! When you do, it will be on a shutter."

"And I shall not let you pound me. I warn you to mind your own business."

"Time!" roared the pugilist gloatingly.

Ralph took in the situation in all its bearings. He realized that he confronted a young giant. To oppose his prodigious muscular strength in even battle would be to be hammered to a jelly.

The occasion called for action, however. Ralph reflected for a bare minute, and then he "waded in."

With a rush he made a slanting dive for the brutal bully, aiming squarely for his feet.

Exercising all the muscle of which he was capable, Ralph grasped his antagonist's ankles, took him off his guard, gave him a sudden trip, and sent him toppling backwards.

With a yell of consternation and pain Young Slavin went crashing through the window sash.

CHAPTER VIII--A BAD LOT

Mort Bemis gave an astonished gasp as he saw his crony disappear like magic through the window sash.

His respect for the nerve and prowess of his successor at the switch tower was immensely increased. He spoke not a word, being stupefied and cowed.

Ralph started to leave the room, unmolested now. A sudden outcry checked him. He proceeded to its source--the open window.

Below it on the ground a stirring scene was in progress. It seemed that his masterly fling of Young Slavin had landed that juvenile Hercules directly on top of the individual Ralph had noticed lying asleep under the window, swathed in horse-blankets.

Aroused from dense slumber by a terrific shock, this person had struggled to his feet.

"Well, well," said Ralph, his eyes opening wide as he recognized the disturbed sleeper; "Ike Slump again."

Ralph at once knew the gaunt, desperate-looking fellow, who had jumped from the delayed freight car and knocked him down the previous evening.

The stowaway's face was no longer grimed, and Ralph had a clear view now of its natural lineaments. It was Ike Slump, peaked and wretched-looking. His appearance evidenced that his stolen junk operations and his later fugitive role had not led him into any pleasant path of flowers.

It seemed that Slump, skulking anywhere for hiding and repose like a hunted rat, had utilized the horse-blankets as a bed.

It seemed, too, that he was in constant dread of discovery and arrest. He must have slept with a missile or a weapon always handy, for his fingers now clutched a brick.

Suddenly disturbed, his nervous fears aroused, at sea as to the cause of the shock as Slavin landed on him, Ike had come erect, grabbing the brick instanter.

He was all entangled in his bed coverings, but he maintained a staggering footing. He was reaching out for his disturber to beat him off with the brick.

"You've broken my nose," he yelled; "take that--take that!"

"Murder!" howled Young Slavin.

He did not use his doughty fists, for he could not. In blind rage and terror Ike was striking out with the brick.

He delivered several blows on Slavin's head and face that made Ralph shudder.

A final one sent the young pugilist reeling back against the clapboards of the house. He was blinded with blood and pain, and shouted for help in sniveling terror.

Slump kicked his feet free of the entangling horse-blankets, and darted away towards the railroad tracks.

Ralph turned in disgust from the scene. He faced Bemis, who, his curiosity awakened by the tumult, had come to the window.

"You are training with a nice crowd, Mr. Bemis," observed Ralph. "Better switch off and get back to the main tracks."

"Lots of show for me, isn't there?" growled Mort sullenly.

"Get a roundhouse clearance of clean flues and headlights, and try it," answered Ralph.

The allusions were technical ones that Bemis fully understood. But he only blinked his bleared eyes, and more savagely gritted his teeth on the cigarette he was smoking.

"It's too bad," ruminated Ralph, as he left the place, shaking his shoulders as if to cast off a spatter of filthy mud. "It is a terrible warning, too," he continued. "Thank Heaven for mother, home, and principle! Maybe those fellows haven't got all the blessings that keep me in the right path. I wish I could do them some good. Well, I won't do them any harm. Let Ike Slump go his way. I fancy the punishment he has got will keep him from troubling anyone around Stanley Junction for a while."

Ralph did not inform the local police of Ike's reappearance, nor did he lodge any complaint against Bemis.

He imagined that his visit to the latter had scared off his enemies, as two days went by and there was no further attempt made to obstruct his services at the switch tower.

Affairs there got down to a routine that pleased the young leverman. Not a jar or break in the service occurred. He seemed to have glided naturally into the details of the business, and was able to take it easier now. He did not worry about wrecks any more. Following out old Jack's definite instructions to always strictly obey orders and act promptly, he simply watched 'phone, dial, and levers. He let the limits tower and the yards switches take care of themselves.

It was three days after Ralph's encounter with Young Slavin and the fifth of his service at the switch tower.

His shift had been changed temporarily. It was divided into four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon.

Ralph had an hour for dinner. That especial day his nooning had something of the element of a new interest. His mother told him she had received a brief note from Mrs. Davis.

The latter in a penciled scrawl told Mrs. Fairbanks that the writer was not very well, and would like to have her call that afternoon. She said she wanted to pay back the ten dollars she owed Ralph, as she had received a remittance from her sister.

"Are you going to see her, mother?" inquired Ralph.

"Surely. I will run up to her house as soon as the dishes are washed."

"I hope she will tell you something about those bonds," said Ralph. "I shall be anxious to know the result of your call."

"What time will you be home, Ralph?" asked his mother.

"A few minutes after five," he answered, and started for work, his mind filled with all kinds of anticipations regarding his mother's visit to Mrs. Davis.

A crowd lined the out freight tracks as Ralph reached the depot yards.

A circus had come to town, and the menagerie vans had been switched on the street sidings early that morning.

Now the big circus wagons were unloading these, to convey them to the

tent site up on the common.

Some of the cages were uncovered purposely to advertise the coming show. This had drawn a throng of excited urchins and the loungers from lower Railroad Street.

Ralph halted for a minute or two, watching the removal of some of the cages.

He moved up to one that was the center of a peering, engrossed crowd. Those present acted as though something was going on out of the common.

A person who seemed to be the manager of the show, and looking quite serious and important, was giving some instructions to half a dozen circus hands.

Three of these latter had armed themselves with long pikes. Another carried a pole with a crooked iron end, resembling a giant chicken catcher. A fifth had a stout rope with a chain end forming a halter. The last of the group carried an enormous wire muzzle.

They stood beside a car which held a strong iron cage. This was empty, and at one end its canvas covering was torn, and two of its bars were bent far out of regular position.

Ralph ran up against an old friend as he pressed on the outskirts of the crowd.

This was John Griscom, the veteran engineer who had impressed Ralph into service the day of his first railroading experience when the yards at Acton had caught fire.

Griscom was on his way to the roundhouse to get his locomotive in trim for a regular afternoon trip. His dinner pail swung from his arm. He was such a practical old fellow that Ralph wondered at his taking an interest in anything so trifling as circus excitement.

"What's the excitement, Mr. Griscom?" he asked.

"Animal loose."

"Indeed? When did it escape?"

"That's what's worrying the circus people. They don't know. They just took off the canvas cover of the cage to make the discovery. The train switched here before daylight. It was in the cage then, they say."

Here the six circus hands started out on the quest of the missing animal.

"Search the yards thoroughly," ordered the menagerie manager. "Shoot, if you can't corner him. It won't do the show any good to have him do damage or scare people. Fifty dollars' reward for the capture of the beast!"

"What kind of an animal was it?" Ralph asked of Griscom.

"Toothless old bear, I suppose, or a blind lion," bluffly answered the railroad veteran, who did not have a very high opinion of the average circus wild beast.

Just here the menagerie manager seemed to discover an opportunity for advertising the show and lauding its attractions.

"I beg of you, gentlemen," he said, in a suave tone, as the crowd made a move to follow the searching party--"don't impede our efforts by getting in the way. Calcutta Tom, the largest and fiercest Indian tiger in captivity in any menagerie in the country, is loose. This superb king of the forests killed five men before he was caged, was brought to this country at a cost of six thousand dollars, and, if captured now, will be on exhibition this afternoon, along with the most marvelous aggregation of brute and human celebrities on the face of the civilized globe to-day."

"And all for twenty-five cents--lemonade and popcorn a nickle extra," piped a mischievous urchin.

CHAPTER IX--CALCUTTA TOM

Ralph walked in the direction of the switch tower.

He noticed that all the tracks seemed unusually inactive, even for the noon hour. The main rails were perfectly clear, and a good many locomotives were on the sidings.

Glancing up at the switch tower, Ralph was a good deal surprised to notice that it was entirely unoccupied.

This was startling. Ralph had never known that post of the service to be untenanted at any hour of the day or night.

Then he noticed on the out main rails near the tower a handcar. A trackman stood with his hands on the pumping bar. One foot on the car, his watch in his hand, old Jack Knight was looking impatient and excited.

"Hustle, Fairbanks!" he shouted, and Ralph came up on a sharp run. "Here," spoke Knight, extending a slip of paper to Ralph. "Get down to the depot master, double-quick. Then hustle back to the tower. I'm bound for the limits tower, to keep things straight there."

"Why, what's up, Mr. Knight?" inquired Ralph.

"Mile-a-minute special from the north, due at 1.15. You've got fifteen minutes. The out tracks are set for the 1.05 express all right. Soon as she passes, set

the out main after her so the special will take the in tracks to the limits. No. 6 will wait at the limits while we shoot the special to the out again."

"A special?" repeated Ralph, in some bewilderment, "and from the north----"

"Obey orders," interrupted Knight crisply. "Nothing to move except the express till the special passes. Understand? Don't lose any time. Get that slip to the depot master, and hurry back to the tower."

"All right," spoke Ralph promptly.

He started on a run for the depot, as Knight sprang to the handcar and it was whirled down the rails.

Ralph had a right to be mystified. There was no special in place on the depot tracks. The Great Northern had its terminus at Stanley Junction.

There was a single track running north from the depot, but it was not in use. It had been built by the Great Northern to connect with a belt line fifteen miles distant, all equipped as to rails, switches, and roadbed. Then the holding companies had some squabble. Suits and counter-suits had tied up the line, and it was temporarily out of service on an injunction.

Ralph therefore comprehended that it was only over this stretch of road that any special could be expected from the north. Further, he decided that it must be a very important special that could gain the right of way under existing legal complications and interrupt the regular system of the Great Northern.

However, the order was out and Ralph had definite instructions. He made the depot in three minutes, and darted into the private office of the depot master without ceremony.

That official looked nervous and engrossed. He clicked at a telegraph instrument with one hand, while he hastily unfolded and scanned the slip of paper Ralph had brought.

"Very good," he nodded. "Clear tracks to Springfield. If they boost the special along on the other sections as well as we have done on this, and our president can score a mile-a-minute run, he can reach his dying wife in time."

Ralph hurried back towards the switch tower. He fancied he now understood the situation. The brief words of the depot master had been enlightening.

He guessed that the president of the road at a distance had been apprised of serious illness in his family. Perhaps the attendant physician had wired a time limit. If the anxious husband hoped to see his stricken wife before she died, he must exert every privilege he controlled as the head of a great railroad system.

Ralph reflected that he might have been a thousand miles away when he received the anxious summons. Influence and the wires had possibly called half a dozen interlocking lines into service. Even the law had stepped aside, it seemed, to speed the distressed official on his way, via the north spur of the Great Northern.

The 1.05 express steamed out of the depot just as Ralph reached the switch

tower.

"That clears the situation," he reflected. "Set the out main for the in switch after she passes. Hark!"

Ralph bent his ear at an unusual sound. This was the echo of a sharp locomotive whistle--to the north.

"The special is coming," he observed, and naturally with some excitement--a mile-a-minute dash through the depot and town was a novelty for Stanley Junction.

There was no one visible in the immediate vicinity of the switch tower. The unusual quietude of the yards made Ralph think of Sunday. At a little distance were many engines and freight trains standing on sidings. They were held inactive on order. Engineers and firemen lounged on their cab seats, looking down the yards north expectantly.

Ralph rounded the tower structure briskly. He pulled out his watch.

"Four minutes," he spoke, and turned into the lower doorway.

In a jiffy he would be up the ladder. A turn of the lever, and he, too, could sit down, and from his lofty point of observation leisurely watch the mile-a-minute special flash by.

Half-way across the lower tower space, Ralph checked himself.

A chill, startled sensation crept over his nerves. He halted with a shock, gave a vivid stare, and uttered a sharp gasp.

A growl had warned him. Ralph saw a bristling, sinuous form arise from the floor directly at the bottom of the ladder.

Two fire-balls seemed to glow at him with venom and menace. In a flash the young leverman realized the situation.

Ralph Fairbanks faced the escaped tiger.

CHAPTER X--A MILE A MINUTE

Ralph stood dumfounded as he made out the great Indian tiger, Calcutta Tom, that "had cost six thousand dollars to cage after it had killed five men."

The encounter was so unlooked for that Ralph stood transfixed for a second or two.

The escaped animal could not have been long in the switch house, otherwise Knight or others would have discovered it. It had escaped before daybreak that morning. Since then it must have been in hiding around the depot yards.

About twenty feet away from the switch tower were some open vault-like recesses fitting into a brick abutment. This inclined from the depot baggage room. Up and down this, baggage was run on trucks. It was possible that for a time the tiger had lurked in some of these dark recesses, transferring itself to the lower tower room within the last fifteen minutes.

Calcutta Tom was a formidable-looking beast of enormous size. Ralph noticed, however, that while the animal growled and bristled fiercely, it did not crouch or threaten to spring. It posed clumsily, showed no teeth--if it had any--and seemed determined to act simply on the defensive and repel intruders.

Toot-toot-toot-too-ooo-oot!

The shrill, strange whistle in the distance cut vividly on Ralph's ear because it proceeded from that unusual locality--the north spur.

With a thrill he caught its signal warning. The limited was coming, the mile-a-minute special would be hammering the main depot rails in less than three minutes now!

Its engineer had right of way track signal from fifteen miles back. He was not expected to be looking out for obstructions. The "O.K. clear" order meant that he need not trouble his mind as to complications in unfamiliar territory. The delayed express on the out track was hidden from view by a curve. Even if discovered, the special, going at a tremendous rate of speed, could not slow up in time to avoid a collision.

All these thoughts flashed through the young leverman's mind within the space of a single second. Ralph knew that he must instantly scale the ladder and set the levers, or else all would be lost.

He made a reckless run for the iron ladder. Four feet from it, he went bounding back like a rubber ball.

Calcutta Tom had simply raised a ponderous paw. It dropped on Ralph's breast with the force of a sledge-hammer.

Ralph landed with a thud against the inside sheathing of the tower. Then he stumbled flat, but came erect, grasping a broken brake-rod his hand had chanced to touch on the floor.

Again the "Clear the way!" signal of the speeding special to the north sent the blood rushing through his veins like quicksilver.

Ralph sprang at the tiger, striking out with all his strength.

The bar was wrenched from his grasp by his formidable brute foe. He saw

it twisted up like a bit of flexible licorice. The tiger made a spring. Its bristling form filled the doorway almost as quickly as Ralph had sped through it.

There the tiger stood, blinking at the light, and snarling fiercely. Ralph gave a great gasp of desperation, and looked wildly all about him for escape from his dilemma.

No one on the sidings was near enough to signal to any advantage. By the time he could summon help and explain matters, the special would be on hand and the damage done.

A cold sweat came out all over his body. Ralph began to quake. It meant sure death to oppose the stubborn brute in the open doorway.

"What shall I do--oh, what can I do?" panted Ralph in a torment of agony.

He ran out a few steps and looked up at the tower room. This loomed twenty feet aloft, flanging out mushroom-fashion over the lower story, which presented a solid base.

The tower room was inaccessible, even if he could scale the lower building. Ralph ran a complete circuit of the structure. Then his eye flashed with sudden hope.

As nimbly as though his tiger foe was directly at his heels, Ralph sprang at and clasped a telegraph pole. Its surface was roughened and indented by the hooks of linemen, allowing him to get a lifting grip.

Ralph drew himself up slowly. The ascent to his overwrought mind seemed to consume an age. It was just forty-five seconds, however, when twenty-five feet from the ground, his slivered and bleeding hands grasped the first cross-bar of the telegraph pole and he lifted himself to it.

A foot or two down and six feet away was the glass-windowed side of the tower room. Ralph pulled himself erect till both feet rested on the narrow cross-bar.

He steadied himself on his dizzy perch. He seemed to have ceased to breathe, and his heart stood still, so intense was the strain on his nerves. The wreck and ruin of a great railroad system to his exaggerated senses seemed to impend on his success in a daring dive.

For a dive it was, and a desperate one. All the upper sashes fronting him were lowered, as was the usage in clear weather. Ralph caught the shrieking blast of the special. His expert ear told him that it was less than a mile distant. He poised, wavered, and then made a forward spring.

There was a great clatter of glass. Ralph half hung over the top of the lower and the lowered sashes, but his feet had kicked in the double panes. He fairly fell over the sashes into the tower room.

On his feet in a flash, the youth darted a swift glance at the tower clock. It was just 1.15.

"Made it!" he cried, but in a faint, hoarse tone--"made it, but just in time!"

He was so overcome that it was his sheer weight rather than any exertion of muscle that pulled bar 4 over into place. Then Ralph staggered back, and fairly fell into the armchair.

The ordeal had been a terrible one. He understood how a man's hair turned white sometimes in an hour. His teeth were chattering, his cheeks blanched. He turned his eyes to the north, chained to the chair momentarily in a kind of a dread stupor.

A flagman across the rails was yelling up at him. He had witnessed Ralph's sensational proceedings, and was staring at the broken window panes. Ralph did not hear him.

Instead, his ears were filled with a grinding on the north rails. Tearing down them, swaying from side to side, shrieking out constantly for clear tracks, a locomotive with one car attached reached the far depot end and went its length like a flash of light.

"The special!" breathed Ralph,--"on time!"

CHAPTER XI--SPOILING FOR A FIGHT

As Ralph spoke the special was a blur as it passed the tower, a flying spot as it flashed to the in rails, a speck as it turned the curve.

Ralph sat motionless till he caught its whistle past the limits tower. Then he realized that his crucial test was past and done.

The telephone bell rang noisily. The dial indicator began to move. The delayed freights set up a piping call for service. For five minutes Ralph jumped actively from lever to lever. He was glad of the task--it diverted his mind from the harrowing ordeal that had so nearly unmanned him.

As there was a lull in the service, Ralph thought of the tiger below. He started to send a message for relief over the 'phone. Just then he noticed a familiar form smoking a pipe on a baggage truck near by.

"Hey, Stiggs!" he called from the open window.

The person addressed was a simple-faced, smiling man of about fifty. He wore a railroad jumper and overalls, but they were spotless, as if he had pretty light work. He wore, too, a regular fireman's peaked cap--in fact looked like a seasoned railroad hand, but moved as placidly towards the tower at Ralph's hail as though he was inspector-general and main owner of the railroad.

Stiggs was a character about the yards. He was one of the first switchmen employed by the Great Northern. About two years previously, however, he had got terribly battered up in trying to rescue an express driver and his horses who had got wedged in on an X-switch. Stiggs succeeded, but paid the penalty.

When he came out of the hospital he was sound of limb, but his mind was affected. He was not dangerous or troublesome, but he still imagined that he was in active service for the railroad company.

The Great Northern pensioned him, and he and his wife got along quite comfortably on the sixteen dollars a month allowed them, as they owned their little home. Stiggs, however, haunted the yards. He put on a fresh, clean working suit twice a week, and went the rounds of depot, flag-shanties, switch tower, and roundhouse twice a day regularly.

He was so pleasant and inoffensive that all hands gave him a welcome. He ran errands for men on duty, and at times unofficially spelled the crossings flagmen while they went to their meals.

His great need was tobacco. His wife would buy him none, saying they could not afford it. When the railroad men rewarded his little services with a pipeful or a package of his favorite brand, Stiggs was a very happy man.

"Want me?" he called up to Ralph as he neared the tower.

"Yes," answered Ralph. "Will you do an errand for me?"

"Sure pop. That's what the company hires me for, isn't it?" demanded Stiggs cheerfully.

"You know where the circus train is unloading?"

"Over near the street--of course. I supervised getting their band chariot down the skids. New men here--never handled chariots before. They'd have smashed her if I hadn't been on deck to direct them."

"Experience counts, Mr. Stiggs," remarked Ralph indulgently.

"You bet it does--that's what the company hires me for."

"Well, you go down and see if any of the circus people are still around."

"They were ten minutes ago."

"Find the manager. You know one of their wild animals is loose?"

"I heard so."

"Then you bargain for a reward. Tell them you can produce their escaped tiger if they pay you for your trouble."

Stiggs stared in perplexed simplicity at Ralph.

"But I can't," he demurred, "and I never tell a lie, you know."

"Yes, you can," asserted Ralph--"at least I can. I know where the animal is. You hurry the circus manager here, and I will show up the tiger."

Simple-minded Stiggs craned his neck as if expecting to see the animal in question in Ralph's company. Then his face grew mildly reproachful.

"I didn't think you would try to hoax me, Fairbanks!" he said sorrowfully.

"I wouldn't for the world, Mr. Stiggs," said Ralph. "I have too much respect for you. Do as I say now--only hurry. Make a good bargain, for a little money won't do Mrs. Stiggs any harm. Hustle, though--for tigers are slippery customers, you know."

Stiggs nodded dubiously, and set off on his errand. Ralph kept an eye on the side of the tower where the lower entrance was, ready to warn anyone approaching.

He could hear the animal occupant of the room below moving about. Then it quieted down, after a jangle of metal pieces. Ralph figured out that it had made its lair in the darkest corner of the apartment where there was a heap of old junk.

He looked down the ladder, but did not venture below.

It was about ten minutes after Stiggs had departed on his errand, that Ralph had occasion to warn a newcomer.

He had watched this person cross the tracks from Railroad Street in a rather lurching, irresponsible way.

As he came nearer, Ralph recognized the belligerent friend of his predecessor at the switch tower, Young Slavin.

Ralph had not seen nor heard from Slavin, Bemis, or Ike Slump since his adventure with the trio at "The Signal" restaurant on lower Railroad Street.

As Slavin drew nearer, Ralph judged, from the way that he glanced up at the tower, that this was his intended goal, and, from the way he clenched his fists and hunched up his shoulders, that he had got himself primed for some mischief.

Slavin halted as he got within ten feet of the switch tower. In a stupid, solemn sort of way he scanned its side, trying to determine where its entrance was located. Ralph stuck his head out of the window.

"Hello, there!" he hailed.

"Hello, yerself!" retorted Slavin, finding some difficulty in steadying himself as he crooked his neck to make out his challenger. "Who's that? Fill my heart with joy by just telling me it's the fellow I'm looking for--young Fairbanks!"

"That is who it is," responded Ralph promptly. "Want me?"

"Do I!" chuckled Slavin, cutting a pigeon-wing and giving a free exhibition of pugilist fist play. "Oh, don't I! Business, strictly business--young man. Will you come down, or shall I come up?"

"I don't want to see you bad enough to come down," observed Ralph. "As to

coming up, I warn you not to attempt it, just at present."

"Afraid, eh?" jeered Slavin.

"Was I the other night?" asked Ralph pointedly.

"That was a foul," cried Slavin wrathfully. "I've come for satisfaction now, and I'm going to have it."

"Not in working hours, and not here," declared Ralph definitely. "Hold on, Slavin!" he called in some alarm, as his irresponsible visitor rounded the structure, bent on forcing an entrance. "Hey, stop! Don't go in there."

Slavin had reached the lower door of the tower room.

"I tell you to stop!" cried Ralph strenuously. "There's a wild beast in there--the tiger that escaped from the circus."

"You can't bluff me," retorted Young Slavin, making a determined lurch through the doorway.

Ralph ran to a window sill and seized a long iron wrench lying there. He was really alarmed for the safety of his would-be visitor.

At all odds, he felt it his duty to save even an acknowledged enemy from a foolhardy fate.

Ralph got to the trap, and started to descend the ladder.

A curdling yell rang out from below, and Ralph saw tiger and pugilist whirling together in a maze of wild confusion.

CHAPTER XII--THE SUPERINTENDENT'S OPINION

It seemed as if the escaped circus tiger had disputed the intrusion of Young Slavin just as it had previously that of Ralph.

Whether his belligerent enemy had tried to beat off the animal, or it had attacked Slavin as he attempted to ascend the ladder, Ralph could not tell. One thing was sure, however: the impetuous "champeen" found himself in the mix-up

of his life.

The tiger was growling and snarling. Slavin was uttering muffled shouts of terror and pain. Ralph fairly dropped down half a dozen rungs of the ladder.

The wrench with which he had armed himself was heavy, and had a very long handle. Six feet from the floor of the lower tower room, Ralph leaned as far out as he could, holding on to the ladder by one foot and one hand.

Swinging the wrench in the other hand and watching his opportunity, Ralph landed a sturdy whack directly on top of the head of the infuriated tiger.

The blow was severe enough to crack the skull of a human being. The tiger, however, only ducked its head and sneezed, but it relaxed its hold of Slavin.

Ralph saw its great paw cut the air in one lightning-like downward stroke. He saw Slavin, with a curdling shriek, bound through the doorway like a ball. Then the tiger turned, caught sight of his new assailant, and crouched with a malignant snarl, posing for a spring.

Ralph took aim. He let go of the heavy wrench, using it as a missile now. It struck the tiger squarely between the eyes, throwing the animal off its balance. Then with due agility Ralph shot up the ladder like a steeple-jack.

Once in the tower room he closed the trap and fastened it down. A glance from its window showed some commotion in the yards round about.

A wild, tattered figure was scudding in frenzy for the street. It was Young Slavin. He was hatless, and, from neck to heel down his back, every garment he wore was ripped exactly in two as if slashed scientifically by a butcher-knife.

This envelope of tatters and Slavin's fearful outcries had attracted the attention of flagmen, engineers, and brakemen in the vicinity. They shouted after the scurrying fugitive, they even tried to head him off for an explanation. Slavin, however, lost to reason for the moment, made a mad bee-line for Railroad Street, and disappeared behind some freight sheds.

Ralph hailed a roundhouse hand carrying a bucket of oil.

"Shut the lower door, will you?" he asked.

The man did so. It operated on a spring, and all he had to do was to detach a hook from a staple that held it open.

"Slip the padlock," continued Ralph.

"Why, that will lock you in!" exclaimed the bewildered oilman.

"That's all right," answered Ralph. "Thanks."

He smiled to himself as he answered some switch calls. The smile broadened as he ran over the exciting incidents of the hour.

Young Slavin was probably more scared than hurt. In his muddled condition, amid the semi-darkness of the lower tower room he might not have discerned or realized what had attacked him.

"He will report me a demon, and his friends will think me one, if he shows

up in those tatters, laying his plight to my charge," smiled Ralph. "Well, I fancy 'the young Hercules' has got all the satisfaction he wants for the present."

In about fifteen minutes Ralph leaned from the window to greet a coterie he had been expecting for some time.

Stiggs, placid-faced and leisurely as usual, led a party Ralph had seen grouped around the circus cages on the street tracks at noon.

The six menagerie men still carried their equipment for capturing the escaped tiger: pikes, hooks, halter chain, and muzzle.

The manager, his hat stuck back on his head, nervously chewing a match and urging Stiggs to hurry, looked very much excited.

"Come, can't you hustle a bit?" Ralph heard him say to Stiggs. "Where's your tiger?"

Stiggs pointed up to the switch tower.

"What are you giving me?" demanded the circus manager in disgust--"that's a boy."

"He sent me--he knows where the tiger is," asserted Stiggs.

"Oh, that's it. Young man!" called up the circus manager. "Do you know this man?"

"Very intimately. I sent him to you. I have located your escaped animal, as he told you, I presume?" said Ralph.

"He did. It's true, then?" cried the circus manager eagerly. "Where is the brute?"

"Mr. Stiggs," called down Ralph, "are these people going to pay you for your trouble?"

"Oh, sure," replied Stiggs animatedly. "See there--they gave me a whole package of tobacco."

Ralph regarded the simple-minded railroad pensioner pityingly. He fixed a censorious glance on the circus manager. The latter flushed and looked embarrassed.

"He said that was all he wanted," stammered the man.

"Oh, well, that won't do at all," declared Ralph. "Your animal has done some damage--in fact, came very nearly doing a great deal of damage. Besides that, Mr. Stiggs is a poor man. You offered a liberal reward for the capture of the animal this morning, I believe. Does that offer stand good now?"

A little crowd had been drawn to the spot by the presence of such an unusual group. Among them was a young fellow who had kept with the party since it had started out.

The circus manager knew this young man to be a reporter on the local paper, in the quest of a sensation. He could not risk an effective free advertisement by an exhibition of niggardliness on the part of the proprietors of the circus.

"Sure," he said importantly; "our people spare no expense in catering to the great show-going public. They spent six thousand dollars in caging the famous Calcutta Tom, the wonder of the animal universe, and--

"You went over all that this noon," said Ralph, in a business-like way. "What about the fifty dollars?"

"Have you got the tiger?"

"I have," answered Ralph definitely.

"Produce him, and the money is yours."

"Very good," nodded Ralph, tossing down the key to the padlock of the lower door. "You will find the escaped animal downstairs here."

The local reporter made himself unduly active within the ensuing thirty minutes. He had written up Ralph Fairbanks once before. That was when the young railroader had acted as substitute fireman during the big fire in the yards at Acton, as already related in "Ralph of the Roundhouse."

Ralph had proven "good copy" in that instance. The fact of his having the escaped animal in custody, the litter of glass under the tower windows, some vague remarks of the flagman who had witnessed Ralph's sensational ascent of the telegraph pole, set the young reporter on the trail of a first-class story in a very few minutes.

The circus manager and his assistants soon had Calcutta Tom in fetters. As they pulled him out into daylight the manager cuffed and kicked him till the animal slunk along, spiritless and harmless as some antiquated horse.

He drew out a roll of bank bills, counted out fifty dollars, made sure the reporter was noticing the act, and with a flourish tossed the money up to Ralph.

He wrote out a free pass to the show for Stiggs, slapping him on the shoulder and calling him a royal good fellow.

"Don't know if the railroad company can spare me," said Stiggs, shaking his head slowly.

"Come up here, Mr. Stiggs," said Ralph.

Jack Knight came along from the limits tower just then. He was halted by the reporter. Stiggs joined Ralph a few minutes later.

"I want to tell you, Mr. Stiggs, about this fifty dollars' reward from the circus people," began Ralph.

"Yes, glad you got it, Fairbanks," said Stiggs heartily. "If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have got the tobacco."

"Well, I want you to tell Mrs. Stiggs when you go home that I've got twenty-five dollars for her," went on Ralph.

"My! that's a lot of money," exclaimed the old railroad pensioner, opening wide his eyes. "Say, Fairbanks, that would stock me up with tobacco for the rest of my life!"

Knight came through the trap, the local reporter at his heels.

"What's been going on here?" demanded the veteran towerman, with a glance at the broken window panes.

Ralph glanced at the reporter. That individual had a paper tab in his hand all covered with notes, and looked eager and expectant.

"If our friend here will excuse our attention to railroad business strictly, I will try to tell you," said Ralph.

"Certainly," nodded the reporter, but disappointedly, as Ralph took Knight to the end of the room and a low-toned conversation ensued.

The same was interspersed with sensational, startling ejaculations of wild excitement, such a vivid play of interest and wonder on the part of old Jack, that the reporter wriggled in a kind of professional torment. He knew that Ralph must have a graphic story to relate.

"Mr. Fairbanks," he said anxiously, as the two terminated their conversation, "I hope you will give me a brief interview."

"Really, I couldn't think of it," answered Ralph, with a genial smile. "A tiger escaped from the circus and hid in the switch tower. That's about the facts of the case."

"You're a deal too modest," snorted old Jack. "You see, he's a stickler for railroad ethics," he explained to the reporter. "Well, that's all right in a young man, for the company usually want to give out their own reports to the press. In this instance, though, I don't think they will hold back the credit young Fairbanks deserves. You come with me, young man, and as soon as I report to the superintendent, I think you can get the facts for the liveliest railroad sensation you have had in Stanley Junction for many a long day."

Ralph had no right to interfere with this arrangement.

Knight came back in thirty minutes, chuckling gleesomely.

"Shake, old man!" he called out, grasping Ralph's hand with a switch-lever clutch that would have made his assistant wince a week back. "I guaranteed you to the company when they put you on here. The man with the iron mask just thanked me for it. Thanked me for it, just think of it--and smiled!"

"Who is the man with the iron mask?" asked Ralph innocently.

"The superintendent, of course. Ever see him? Well, they say he was born with a frown on his face, called down his father and mother when he was six months old, and spent ten years at a special actors' school where they learn the ebony glare, the tones that chill a fellow, and that grand stern air that makes a railroad employee shake in his boots when the superintendent passes by."

"Why, I have found him rather dignified, but a thoroughly just and genial gentleman," said Ralph.

"Thank you, Fairbanks!" interrupted a voice that made the two friends start,

and the head of the superintendent of the Great Northern came up through the trap. "Quite a word-painter, Mr. Knight!" he continued, glancing at old Jack with a grim twinkle in his eye.

"Ah, overheard me, did you?" retorted Knight, never abashed at anything. "You didn't wait till I got through. I was going to add, for the benefit of our young friend here, that all the qualities I was describing have made you the most consistent, thoroughgoing railroader in the country, that back of the mask were more pensions to deserving disabled employees than the law allowed, and a justice and respect for loyal subordinates that made you an honorary member of our union, and the Great Northern the finest railway system ever perfected."

"Thank you, Mr. Knight!" retorted the superintendent, a genuine flush of pleasure on his face. "I know you are sincere, so you will join me, I am certain, in telling our young friend that the risk he took to save the special this day entitled him to a high place in the esteem of his employers and associates."

"Right you are, sir!" answered Knight emphatically. "I'm proud of Ralph Fairbanks--and so are you."

CHAPTER XIII--SQUARING THINGS

Ralph was tremendously pleased at the praise of the superintendent of the Great Northern. He started for home, his work through with for the day, feeling that life was very much worth living.

He lost no time on this especial occasion in reaching the home cottage. He wanted to share his pleasure with his devoted mother.

Ralph found the front door locked. He had a key to it however, let himself in, and was wondering at this unusual absence of his mother at a regular meal hour, when he caught sight of a folded note on the little table in the hall.

"I am at Mrs. Davis'," his mother's note ran. "She is not very well, and wishes me to stay with her for a few hours. Please call for me at her house at about nine o'clock."

Entering the little dining room, Ralph found the table all set. He proceeded to the kitchen, and discovered under covers on a slow fire his meal ready to be served.

"Always kind and thoughtful," he reflected gratefully, as he sat down to his solitary repast. "Nine o'clock, eh? That gives me time to attend to some pressing duties. Perhaps Mrs. Davis may have something to say about those bonds."

Ralph's mother had done her duty in seeing to it that he was not put out by her absence. He now proceeded to do his by clearing up the table and washing the dishes. He had everything in order before he left the house.

He sauntered downtown, changed a twenty-dollar bill that was among those the circus manager had given him, and started down a humble side street.

In about ten minutes Ralph reached the Stiggs home. It was a small one-story structure, but comfortable-looking and well-kept.

In the garden was a small summerhouse. A spark of light directed Ralph thither. It appeared that Stiggs was banished from the house while using his favorite weed. This was his "smokery."

Before Ralph could announce his presence, someone spoke from an open window of the house.

"John Jacob Stiggs--smoke! smoke! smoke!" proclaimed a high-pitched voice-. "I should think you'd be ashamed--at it all the time. If you are so valuable to your railroad cronies why don't you bring home a chicken, or a watermelon, or a bag of potatoes once in a while, instead of your perpetual 'plug cut,' and 'cut loaf,' and 'killmequick'? Oh, dear! dear! you are such a trial."

"That's so--never thought of that," responded Stiggs from his snuggery, in his usual quiet way. "But, my dear, something is coming. Some money--you know I told you."

"Nonsense!" retorted Mrs. Stiggs violently. "They stuff you full of all kinds of stories. Last week you said they were going to make you master mechanic."

"I declined it! I declined it!" answered Stiggs in quick trepidation. "The responsibility of the position--think of it, my dear!"

"Well, I suppose you're my cross," sighed his helpmate patiently. "Only, don't get a woman's hopes all alive with your story of five dollars coming, and a new shawl for me."

"Ten, my dear," interrupted Stiggs. "I've quite forgotten the amount, but I am sure it was more than five. You see, I helped catch a tiger----"

"John Jacob Stiggs!" cried his wife severely, "you'd better keep those wild notions out of your head. Tigers! Who ever saw a tiger in Stanley Junction?" she sniffed disdainfully.

"Why, I did, Mrs. Stiggs," broke in Ralph, stepping to the window with a pleasant smile, and lifting his cap politely. "It escaped from the circus now in

town. Your husband helped me get it into the hands of the show people, they paid us fifty dollars' reward for our services, and half of it belongs to Mr. Stiggs. There is his share, madam."

"Laws-a-mercy!" cried the astounded woman, as the crisp green bills were placed on the window ledge. "You don't mean----"

"Twenty-five dollars," nodded Ralph.

"His? mine? ours?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stiggs. You can have a famous new shawl now, can't you, madam?"

"Oh, come in. Oh, dear! dear! it don't seem real."

Ralph stepped around to the door and entered the little sitting room. Mrs. Stiggs could not keep still for excitement. She was laughing and crying by turns.

Old Stiggs followed after Ralph in a kind of dumb amazement, and stood staring at the banknotes in his wife's hand. She chanced to observe him. For the first time in his life, it seemed, her husband had ventured inside the house smoking his despised tobacco.

"John--Jacob--Stiggs!" she screamed.

"Oh--my!" gasped the horrified culprit.

The lighted pipe dropped from his mouth, and he bolted out of doors as if shot from a cannon.

Mrs. Stiggs was profuse in her thanks. She got more coherent, and poured out her little troubles to Ralph, who was a sympathetic listener. He gave her some advice, and his heart warmed as he finally left the house, happy in the consciousness that he had bestowed some pleasure and benefit where he felt sure they were fully deserved.

"Anybody but mother would call me a chump for what I've got to do next," he mused, as he proceeded briskly in the direction of lower Railroad Street, "but I've got the impulse, and it looks clear to me that I'm doing the right thing all around."

Ralph proceeded past the long line of poor buildings just back of the depot tracks. He looked into the restaurant where he had found Mort Bemis and Young Slavin some evenings previous.

They were not in evidence now, however, at this or other places he inspected. Ralph made inquiries of some "extras," who had a good deal of spare time, and were likely to know the denizens of Railroad Row.

No one could tell him of the whereabouts of the persons he sought, until he met a young urchin whom he questioned.

"Slavin?" pronounced the precious street arab. "Champeen? He's at Murphy's shed."

A man named Murphy ran a cheap ice cream place further down the street,

Ralph remembered. The shed he also recalled as a loafing place for juvenile road hands around the noon and evening hours.

It was a great open structure where expressmen stored their wagons for shelter. Ralph reached its proximity in a few minutes. He glanced around the open end of the place.

Three or four boys were squatted on the ground. Two of them had a coat and a vest, on which they were clumsily sewing. Near by, wrapped in an old horse-blanket, seated on a box, his eyes fixed gloomily on the ground, was the object of Ralph's visit--Young Slavin.

Ralph went forward at once. Two of the group sprang to their feet, startled. Young Slavin, looking spiritless and cowed, craned his bull neck in silent wonder and uncertainty.

"Mr. Slavin," spoke Ralph promptly, "I have been trying to find you."

"What for?" mumbled Slavin in a muffled tone. "I'm ripped up the back. Out of training--see you later."

"Oh, I haven't come to fight," Ralph assured him. "It is this way: I saw you meet with an unfortunate accident this afternoon."

"If you mean you made rags of the only suit of clothes I've got, it's correct," admitted Slavin dejectedly.

"Well, I warned you, but you would rush on your fate," said Ralph. "Pretty badly used up, are they?"

"Are they?" snorted Slavin bitterly. "They were ripped from stem to stern. And what's worse--look at them now!"

Ralph could scarcely keep from laughing outright. One of the amateur tailors had essayed to mend Slavin's trousers.

He had taken up a seam four inches wide. In pursuing the seam, he had sewed it into bunches, knobs, and fissures. One leg was shorter than the other, and stood out at an angle from the knee down.

"No, that won't do at all," said Ralph gravely. "I felt sorry for you, Slavin. As I warned you, that tiger was in the switch tower. I got a reward for telling the circus people where it was, and I think it is only fair that they pay for the damage the animal did. They advertise a good eight-dollar suit down at the Grand Leader. Go and get one. That squares it, doesn't it?"

Ralph extended a ten-dollar bill to Slavin. The eyes of his engrossed companions snapped at the sight of so much money. As for Slavin himself, he stared at the bill and then at Ralph in stupid wonder.

"Take it," urged Ralph.

"Mine?" gulped Slavin slowly.

"Of course it's yours."

"You give it?"

"Why not? I collected damages from the circus people--that's your share."

Slavin's fingers trembled as he took the proffered banknote. He wriggled restively, looked up, and then looked down.

"Say," he spoke hoarsely at last, "your name is Fairbanks."

"Yes," nodded Ralph.

"A good name, and you're a good sort. I jumped on you wrong the other night, and I want to say it right here. I thought Mort Bemis was my friend. This afternoon he took up with a fellow named Slump, broke open my trunk, stole two of my silver medals, and sloped. That's what I got for being his friend. Now you come and do me a good turn. I'm not your kind, and we can't ever mix probably, but if ever you want anyone hammered, I'll be there. See? I'm--I'm obliged to you, Fairbanks. You've taught me something. There's something better in the world than muscle--and you've got it."

When Ralph left the old shed, he was pretty certain that he had made a new friend. He had, too, won the respect of the little coterie who had seen the terrible "champeen" eat humble pie before a fellow half his size.

Ralph went to a millinery store next. The Saturday evening before he had accompanied his mother on her shopping tour. She had admired a hat in a show-window, but had said she could not spare the money for it just then.

Ralph proudly walked home with the self-same hat in a band-box.

"I have made quite a hole in that fifty dollars," he mused, as he left the band-box at the home cottage, and started for Mrs. Davis' house. "I wonder if I would be as extravagant on a bigger scale, if we should be fortunate enough to get back those twenty thousand dollars' worth of railroad bonds?"

CHAPTER XIV--A BUSY EVENING

The nearest cut to the house where Mrs. Davis lived was along a sort of a ravine, and Ralph pursued this route. It was the shortest, and it was here that the switch spur was to run up to Gasper Farrington's old factory.

Ralph was interested in this as a railroader. The work of grading had already commenced. It was not to be a very particular job, as the service would be only occasional. The company was using old rails and second-hand ties.

There was a natural rock shelf on the north side of the ravine. This the roadbed would follow. There were several sharp grades, but there would be no heavy traffic. The entire factory output, which was in the furniture line, would not exceed a carload a day.

Mrs. Davis' home stood back from the ravine about a hundred feet. It was some three hundred yards from the factory building. Between it and the latter structure was a low two-story house, very old and dilapidated. Ralph wondered if this was the spot which Farrington had said he would appropriate, law or no law, as the connecting link in his right of way.

"Mr. Farrington may well look out for wrecks," soliloquized Ralph, as he passed along the ravine. "The freight business from the factory is not worth enough for the company to put in a first-class roadbed. A poor one means danger. They will have to go slow on some of those mean curves and crooked grades, if they want to avoid trouble."

Ralph turned from the ravine as he caught the gleam of a light in the house he knew to be occupied by the mysterious Mrs. Davis.

It was a desolate place, and he felt sorry for anyone compelled to live so remote from neighbors. He felt glad, however, that the lonely widow had been so fortunate as to find a friend in his mother.

Mrs. Davis had proven her honesty by wishing to repay him the ten-dollar loan. Ralph in a way counted that evening on some intimation concerning the twenty thousand dollars railroad bonds. He was naturally wrought up and anxious over this particular phase of the situation.

The house did not front on the ravine. In approaching it, Ralph came up to its side first. The light that had guided him was in a middle room. Its window was open and the shade was lowered, but the breeze blew it back every little while.

It was a bright moonlight night. Ralph could make out the house and its surroundings as plain as day. As he walked beside a hedge of high alders, he paused with a start.

Someone stood directly beside the open window where the light was. The house shadowed him, but even at a distance Ralph could see that the lurker was a boy about his own height.

This person stood with his face to the window. Every time the breeze moved the curtain, he bobbed about actively. He craned his neck, and made all kinds of efforts to look into the room.

"Why," said Ralph indignantly, "it is someone spying!"

The breeze freshening, the curtain was just then blown on a forty-five de-

gree slant. A perfectly plain view of the room and its inmates was momentarily shown.

Even at a distance Ralph could make out Mrs. Davis propped up in a chair with pillows, and his mother seated near by.

The lurker at the window was taking a good clear look. He suddenly whipped a card out of his pocket. He glanced at it quickly, then inside the room again. The breeze let down, and the curtain dropped plumb once more.

Ralph made an impetuous run for the window. He came up to the lurker, grabbed his arm, and still at full momentum ran him twenty feet along from the window. He did not wish to startle the inmates of the house. The astonished boy he had seized Ralph landed against the side of a summerhouse. He never let go of him. His prisoner wriggled in his grasp.

"Hey, what's this?" he began.

"Who are you and what are you up to?" challenged Ralph sharply. "What!" he cried, loosening his hold in stupefaction. "Van--Van Sherwin!"

"Hello!" muttered his companion, now faced squarely about, and staring in turn. "It is you, Fairbanks? Well, that's natural, seeing your mother is here, but you took me off my feet so sudden. Shake. You don't seem glad to see me one bit, although it's an age since I met you last. How goes it?"

Ralph shook the hand affectionately extended. It was not the hearty greeting, however, he usually awarded to this his warmest boy friend. Ralph looked grave, uncertain, and disappointed.

Of all the chums he had ever known, Van Sherwin had come into his life in a way that had appealed strongly to every friendly sentiment. Deprived of reason temporarily through a blow from a baseball, and practically adopted by the Fairbanks family, Van's gentle, lovable ways had charmed them. When he recovered his reason and was the means of introducing Ralph to Farwell Gibson, Van was cherished like a brother by Ralph.

Less than two weeks previous Van had gone back to the wilderness stretch beyond Springfield, where Gibson was keeping his railroad cut-off charter alive by grading the roadbed so much each day, as required by law.

Through Gibson Ralph had got the information that enabled them to prove Gasper Farrington's mortgage on their home a fraud. Naturally he felt thankful to the queer old hermit who was working out an idea amid Crusoe-like solitude.

As to Van,--mother and son made him a daily topic of conversation. They had longed for a visit from the strange, wild lad who had unconsciously brought so much good into their lives.

Now Van had appeared, yet a vague distrust and disappointment chilled the warmth of Ralph's reception. Van had always been frank, open-minded, aboveboard. Ralph had just discovered him apparently engaged in eavesdropping.

Thinking all this over, Ralph stood grim and silent as a statue for the space of nearly two minutes.

"Hey!" challenged Van suddenly, giving his arm a vigorous shake. "Are you dreaming, Ralph?"

Ralph roused himself. He determined to clear the situation, if it could be cleared.

"Van," he said definitely, "what were you doing at that window?"

"Why, didn't you see--looking in."

"I know you was. In other words, spying. Oh, Van--spying on my mother!"

Van Sherwin's eyes flashed. In a trice he had whipped off his coat. His fists doubled up. He advanced on Ralph, his voice shaking with an angry sob.

"Take that back, Ralph Fairbanks!" he cried. "Do it quick, or you've got to lick me. Me spy on your mother? Why, she's pretty near my mother, too--the only one I ever remember."

"But I saw you lurking at that window," said Ralph, a good deal taken aback by Van's violent demonstration.

"Lurking, eh?" repeated Van sarcastically. "I'm a lurker, am I? And a spy? Why don't you call me a bravo--and a brigand? Humph--you chump!"

The impulsive fellow shrugged his shoulders in such a pitying, indulgent way that Ralph was fairly nettled.

"I won't fight you," declared Van, putting on his coat again. "You think so much of your mother that I'll forgive you. But I think a lot of her, too, as you well know, and, knowing it, you ought to have thought twice before you--yes, imputed to me any action that could do her any harm."

"You're right, Van," said Ralph, grasping both hands of his eccentric chum, heartily enough this time. "I am so strung up, though, with things happening, and so much suspicion and mystery in the air, that I'm jumping to all kinds of conclusions helter-skelter. I hate mystery, you know."

"Sit down," said Van, moving around to the door of the dismantled summerhouse, and dropping to its worm-eaten seat. "I want to tell you something. I wasn't looking in that window expecting to see your mother."

"No?"

"Not at all."

"Then it must have been Mrs. Davis, the woman who lives there."

"Is that her name?" inquired Van, with a shrewd smile.

"She says it is."

"You know her, then? Well, I don't, Ralph. Never saw her before. Yet, I've traveled a long distance to get a look at her. See here--can you make it out?"

Van took from his pocket the card Ralph had seen him consult at the window. Ralph held it up to the moonlight.

It was an old-fashioned card photograph. Judging from its yellow, faded appearance, it seemed taken in another generation. It presented the face of a woman of about thirty years of age.

Ralph scanned this with a certain token of recognition.

"This picture resembles Mrs. Davis," he said.

"Think so?" asked Van. "I know it does. It's meant for the lady in that room yonder--when she was younger, though."

"How do you come by it?" inquired Ralph.

"It's a secret for the present, but I don't mind telling you. A friend--a long distance away--asked me to locate the original of that picture. Somehow he got a clew to the fact that she was living in this district."

"Yes, she came to Stanley Junction recently."

"Anyhow, I followed out directions," narrated Van. "I've done what I came for. The woman lives in that house yonder. I must go back and inform my friend."

"Not right away. Mother will want to see you, Van."

Van shook his head resolutely.

"I'll be back again soon, Ralph," he promised. "I wish I could tell you more, but it's not my business."

"That's all right, Van. I don't want to pry into your secrets."

Van restored the picture to his pocket. He sighed with a glance at the house, as if it would indeed be a pleasure to have a chat with his adopted mother, Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Oh, Ralph!" he said suddenly, checking himself as he was about to move away--"have you ever heard anything more about those twenty thousand dollars railroad bonds?"

"Have I?" spoke Ralph animately; "I seem to be hearing about them every step I take, lately!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but always in a vague, unsatisfactory way. What made you ask that question, Van?" inquired Ralph, with a keen glance at his companion.

"Oh, nothing," declared Van carelessly. "I was just thinking, that's all. You see, Mr. Gibson is a rare, good fellow."

"He did me some rare, good service--I know that," said Ralph warmly.

"Well, he's pegging away at that railroad of his, wasting valuable time. He don't dare to leave it, because he might vi--vi--bother the word--oh, yes! vitiate his legal rights. He told me, though, that if he could get someone to put up a few thousand dollars so he could hire help, he would go to some big city and interest capital and rush the road through."

"I will bear that in mind," said Ralph thoughtfully. "I believe he has the nucleus of a big speculation. There are rich men in Stanley Junction who might

be induced to help him."

"Suppose you got those twenty thousand dollars bonds, Ralph," said Van suddenly. "Would you be inclined to invest?"

"I would feel it a duty, Van," responded Ralph promptly. "I believe my mother would, too. You will remember that if it was not for Mr. Gibson, we would probably be without a home to-day."

"You're a good fellow, Ralph Fairbanks!" cried Van, slapping his chum heartily on the shoulder. "I knew you'd say that. And say--I guess you're going to hear something about those bonds, soon."

"The air seems full of those bonds!" half smiled Ralph. "I wish something besides shadows would materialize, though."

Ralph felt that Van was keeping something back--certainly about the person so interested in the mysterious Mrs. Davis, possibly in reference to the railroad bonds, as well.

Before he could express himself further, Van grabbed his sleeve and pulled him into the shelter of the summerhouse with a quick warning:

"S-sh!"

"What is it, Van?" inquired Ralph in surprise.

"Speak low, look sharp!" whispered Van, pointing through the interstices of the trellis in the direction of the house. "You hate mystery, you say. Then how does that strike you?"

"Why," exclaimed Ralph, after a steadfast glance in the direction indicated--"it is Gasper Farrington!"

CHAPTER XV--A HERO DESPITE HIMSELF

Ralph did not have to look twice to be sure that it was the village magnate who stood just where he had discovered Van Sherwin a few minutes previous.

Gasper Farrington was stooping stealthily under the open window. He did not seem to care so much to see who was inside. Perhaps he had already seen. His whole attitude showed that he was listening intently.

Ralph disliked Farrington. He had reason for the sentiment. He could not recall one gracious action on the part of the miserly old man in all the years he had known him.

His present occupation, that of an eavesdropper, was so expected and characteristic of Farrington, that Ralph's indignation was less than his contempt.

"What is he after here?" reflected Ralph; "no good, of course. Mrs. Davis knows him and fears him, it seems. He is going."

Before Ralph could make up his mind to any definite course of action, Farrington, after a meditative pause, slunk from under the window. Then he disappeared briskly around the corner of the house.

Ralph ran softly after him and peered around the end of the structure. He saw Farrington headed for town, across lots to the nearest highway.

Ralph came back to the old summer house to find Van gone. He looked for him, even tried a whistle signal both understood, but obtained no response.

"It's all a queer affair," mused Ralph. "Mrs. Davis seems to be a great center of interest just at present. Perhaps she has told mother something that explains matters."

Ralph was doomed to disappointment in this hope. When he knocked at the door of the Davis home, his mother answered the summons.

"Mrs. Davis is resting nicely," she whispered. "It would only excite her to see you to-night. Just wait outside, and I will slip away and join you in a few minutes."

Mrs. Fairbanks was soon on the way homeward with Ralph. She explained that Mrs. Davis was quite unwell and nervous. She had stayed with her and nursed her, and left her comfortable for the night.

"She gave me the ten dollars for you, Ralph," said Mrs. Fairbanks, "but she said very little about the bonds. I have an idea that she knows something about them, and I think she has been writing to Gasper Farrington. The last thing she said as I left her, was for both of us to come to see her to-morrow night. She said she would get something in the meantime she had placed with a friend to show us, in which we would both be interested."

Ralph said nothing to his mother about meeting Van, nor did he mention Farrington's visit to the Davis home. He did not wish to worry his mother, and he hoped that another twenty-four hours might somewhat clear the situation.

Of course Mrs. Fairbanks was more than pleased over her present of the new hat. Her son's recital of the tiger episode frightened and thrilled her by turns.

Ralph did a good deal of thinking after getting to bed. He wondered if Mrs. Davis was up to any double-dealing. Perhaps she knew something of importance about the bonds. She might have come to Stanley Junction to sell her secret to Farrington. Possibly later she became undecided as to her course, her accidental

meeting with Ralph moving her to favor him in the matter.

Ralph guessed that no one but Farwell Gibson could have sent Van to Stanley Junction. Gibson had been mixed up in the matter of his father's railroad bonds, years back. Was there some kind of a three-cornered complication, in which Farrington, Gibson, and Mrs. Davis each had a share, and all three playing at cross-purposes?

At ten o'clock that night the local newspaper left the press, weighted with the biggest sensation of the year, but Ralph did not know it.

He was made aware of it next morning, however, as he left the house. Ned Talcott, an old school chum, came running up to him fluttering a freshly-printed sheet.

"Did you see it? Did you really do all that?" he demanded, in breathless excitement.

"See what--do what?" inquired Ralph.

"Well, just run your eagle eye over these two front columns!" chuckled Ralph's ardent admirer.

"Oh, dear!" said Ralph, in faint stupefaction.

The ambitious newspaper reporter had dished up a wonderfully graphic and interesting story. He did not seem to have missed a point in the episode of the escaped circus tiger.

He had got every fact about the special, every detail of Ralph's encounter with Calcutta Tom, the sensational climb of the telegraph pole, the swing of the lever just in time. He even touched on the accident to Young Slavin, Ralph's benevolence to that enemy, and his generous division of the reward with the Stiggses.

"Whew!" gasped Ralph, concluding the article with a whirling head. "Why, if I wasn't mad at all the bosh he has put into this screed, I could laugh--it is simply ridiculous!"

All the same, the reporter had written a very entertaining article. It was the "fancy touches" that seemed preposterous to Ralph, who had gone through the episode practically.

All through the story the writer held the tension high as to suspense and impending peril. He made the reader fairly see the glaring eyeballs of the defiant tiger. He almost made him hear the wild beatings of the heart of the desperate but intrepid young leverman.

The warning shrieks of the devoted special on the verge of destruction, the nearing hiss and splutter of the steam jets, the thunderous thunder of the grinding wheels--all these were the thrilling concomitants of a breathless description. It ended in the crash of the tower window, the leap to the levers, the action that made of Ralph Fairbanks the hero of the hour.

The grand finale was a pathetic touch. It alluded to the great throbbing heart

of humanity always electrically responsive to such appeals as that involved in the anxious haste of the distressed railroad president to reach a beloved wife at the door of death.

Three people whom Ralph knew stopped him to congratulate him before he reached the depot yards.

A cheer greeted him as he crossed from Railroad Street to the switch tower. It came from a flag-shanty, where four of his firemen friends were standing. Two of them waved papers. Ralph laughed and nodded carelessly, but flushed with pleasure.

"There's two men I would like to have see that article," spoke old Jack Knight, emphatically slapping the newspaper in his lap as Ralph came on duty. "One is the master mechanic. The other is that old skeesicks, Farrington."

Ralph was embarrassed by further congratulations all through the morning. He had a pleasant day, however. The praises of his real friends were very sweet, and the sense of duty well done was a spur to his noblest ambitions.

It was toward five o'clock that the crowning episode of the day occurred. Ralph was busy at the levers, Knight was at the telephone, as the superintendent came up the trap ladder.

His manner to both these valued employees was more than usually genial.

"Dropped in on my way to the roundhouse," he observed. "I received a wire from the president of the Great Northern about an hour ago, Fairbanks."

"Yes, sir?" said Ralph, wondering what was coming.

Shrewd Jack Knight gave a wise chuckle, and his eyes twinkled.

"He mentioned you," pursued the superintendent. "He sent a long wire, requesting an expression of his thanks for prompt service all along the line. He added a paragraph that may interest you. As I take you to be too practical a young man to get the swelled head, or impose on an appreciation of duty well done, I will read the paragraph to you."

The speaker drew a typewritten yellow sheet from his pocket. He resumed:

"The president says: 'I imagine that by young Ralph Fairbanks, who has shown such devotion to his duty and saved the special under such extraordinary circumstances, the intelligence will be gladly received that my timely arrival at home probably saved my dear wife's life. The morning papers here have a full account of his remarkable adventures at the switch tower. I desire that you commend him warmly in my behalf, and it is the sense of the road directors that, while you do not promote him too fast, you must see that he gets what he deserves promptly."

Ralph flushed with emotion. He could not speak.

"Good!" commented blunt old Jack. "The president is a brick. You're another one, Mr. Superintendent, and you don't lose, let me tell you, by warming up

a thrifty employee's heart by giving him the real stuff, right from the shoulder, when he deserves it."

The superintendent smiled and bowed, and went on his way.

"Stiff as a poker, looks as if his only thought was to catch a chance to fire someone," observed Knight, watching the prim, dignified official crossing the tracks below. "Look at him--cold as an iceberg. You've thawed him out, though, Fairbanks!" chuckled the veteran towerman. "That's so--there is something I wanted to find out."

He pretended to be mightily busy poring over a little red memorandum book for a few minutes.

"Got it," he called out finally: "Chief Train Dispatcher. One hundred and seventy-five dollars a month. Keep it in view, kid. You heard what the president said."

"Nonsense!" flushed Ralph; "my highest ambition for a long time to come is to run a locomotive."

Mrs. Fairbanks regarded her son with humid eyes as he told the story of the day that night.

She did not try to express her emotion. She could not. Ever since Ralph had resolutely started at work, there had been what she greeted as a continual round of blessings. And Ralph shared her heartfelt gratefulness.

Right after supper they started together to visit Mrs. Davis. Ralph carried a basket which contained some dainties his mother had prepared for the invalid.

On their way Ralph told his mother of the suspicious circumstances of Gasper Farrington's visit to the Davis home the evening previous. He thought she ought now to know of it. He intimated, too, that it might be wise to warn Mrs. Davis.

"If she would only talk out what is evidently preying on her mind," observed Mrs. Fairbanks, "we could understand the situation much more clearly."

"You know she has promised to enlighten us in a way, this evening," suggested Ralph.

"The house is dark," said his mother, as they neared it.

"Yes, and--why, mother! the door is open."

Ralph knocked loudly. There was no response.

"I hope nothing is amiss," murmured Mrs. Fairbanks, in a fluttering tone.

She groped her way down the dark hall and into the sitting room, stumbling over some garments lying on the floor which nearly tripped her up.

"Mrs. Davis! Mrs. Davis!" she called, "are you here?"

Again there was only silence. Mrs. Fairbanks sighed with deep suspense.

"Perhaps I had better get a light," suggested Ralph.

"I wish you would," said his mother.

Ralph flared a match. He discovered a lamp on a mantel-shelf and lighted it. Mother and son glanced about the apartment searchingly.

On the floor lay the heavy shawl Mrs. Fairbanks had stumbled over. A little table was overturned. A drapery that had festooned the entrance doorway from the hall was torn half loose, as if someone had grasped it in being dragged from the room.

"That looks bad," said Ralph gravely.

He took up the lamp and went all through the house. In the one upper chamber the contents of the bureau drawer were scattered all over the floor. A trunk was broken open, and its interior all in disorder.

"Is she here, Ralph?" questioned his mother anxiously, as he returned to the sitting room.

"No," answered Ralph. "Mother, there is foul play here."

"Oh, Ralph!"

"I am sure of it. Someone has ransacked the house, and I believe they have kidnapped Mrs. Davis."

"But--why?" stammered the affrighted Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Why?" cried Ralph, greatly stirred up by tumultuous thoughts and suspicions that irresistibly thronged his brain. "To secure something that Mrs. Davis had in her keeping, I believe."

"But who would do it?"

"Who?" responded Ralph. "I can imagine only one person who might be interested."

"And that is?"

"Gasper Farrington."

"Right!" pronounced a new voice, startlingly near. "You have hit the nail squarely on the head this time, Ralph Fairbanks!"

CHAPTER XVI--KIDNAPPED

Mother and son turned quickly towards the open doorway of the little sitting room.

It framed a forlorn figure--a boyish form covered with mud, hatless, and disheveled.

"Van!" cried Mrs. Fairbanks in astonishment.

She had a warm corner in her heart for the refugee who had made her home his for so many weeks when his poor mind was distraught.

Her motherly face lit up, and she extended her arms in greeting.

But Van edged up to her gingerly, and kissing her cheek quickly drew back with the remark:

"I've been homesick and hungry for a week just to see you smile and to hear you call me your boy, but I'm too muddy and torn up for even a second-class prodigal son!"

"Why, Van!" cried Ralph; "how did you get in that fix?"

"Run down by a team."

"And you are hurt--there is a deep cut on your cheek."

"Oh, that's a whip-handle clip from a very particular friend of yours," responded Van carelessly. "Ike Slump."

Mrs. Fairbanks shivered at the mention of that detested individual. Ralph was eagerly inquisitive.

"And about Mrs. Davis?" he asked hurriedly.

"The woman who lived here--the photograph woman?"

"Yes, Van. Do you know anything about her?"

"I fancy I do. She has been kidnapped."

"We feared that!" murmured Mrs. Fairbanks anxiously.

"Yes," nodded Van briskly, "it looks that way, and I have had a lively time of it. Did you tell your mother about meeting me here last night, Ralph?"

"No, Van."

"Then I will tell her now. You see, Mrs. Fairbanks, I was caught by Ralph peeking into this very room, last night. I explained to him how it was. I had an old photograph of a woman who turns out to be this Mrs. Davis. I had been instructed to locate her."

"By whom, Van?" inquired the astonished Mrs. Fairbanks.

"It's a secret, it is not my business in a way," he burst forth abruptly, "but I can't keep the truth from you two. I think you ought to know it. I think, too, that the person for whom I am acting, the way things have turned out, would also wish you to know it. Here is the fact: Farwell Gibson is the person who got me to come here to locate this Mrs. Davis."

"Farwell Gibson?" repeated Mrs. Fairbanks in wonderment, though Ralph was not surprised at the statement. He had already half guessed out what his chum now disclosed.

"Yes," nodded Van.

"Then he knows Mrs. Davis?" asked Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Ought to," answered Van promptly, "seeing she is his wife."

"You astound me, Van!" murmured the mystified Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Well, she is. At least, the original of the photograph I showed Ralph is his wife. I don't know all the details, only it's some more of Farrington's fine work. You know Gibson was in his clutches for years. Mr. Gibson and his wife had a bitter quarrel over money matters many years ago. It seemed he had used some of her means in his stock-jobbing operations with Farrington. They separated. Later Farrington made Gibson believe his wife was dead. He did this to get Gibson to consent to sign certain papers that furthered Farrington's schemes. Then he got Gibson under his thumb, and drove him into exile."

"I wonder the villain sleeps nights!" said the indignant Ralph.

"Well, anyhow," proceeded Van, "Gibson got looking into matters, when his meeting with Ralph led to your having your rights, and old Farrington taking the clamps off Gibson by destroying the forged note he had held over him for so many years. Gibson learned that his wife was not dead. He sent me to try and locate her--which I have done."

"But she is lost again," suggested Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Oh, don't fret about that," spoke Van coolly. "I'll find her again, don't you doubt it. You see, all this concerns you and Ralph very closely, I am sure. In fact, Mr. Gibson intimated to me that if he could get into communication with his estranged wife, he believed she could give information that would lead to the recovery of those twenty thousand dollars in railroad bonds."

"Everything fits to one conviction," mused Ralph aloud. "All this being true, it is certainly to Farrington's interest to drive Mrs. Davis away from Stanley Junction."

"They drove her away, right enough," nodded Van vigorously--"in a close carriage, behind a spanking team. It was old Farrington's, and the drivers were Ike Slump and a fellow I heard him call Mort."

"Mort Bemis," murmured Ralph.

"You see," said Van, "when I left you last night, I had only one idea: to get back to Mr. Gibson and report. I started for the depot to take the train for Springfield, intending to come back and see you all in a day or two. Well, on my way to the depot I ran across old Farrington I got thinking that his appearance on the scene, spying on the woman Gibson, was sig--sig--what's the word, anyhow?"

"Significant," suggested Ralph.

"That's it--significant. I thought I would watch him a bit. He did not go home. He went to an old abandoned shanty near the fair grounds. He met two fellows there, apparently waiting for him. They strolled up and down the road, talking together. As soon as I recognized Ike Slump, I knew deep mischief was

up. I saw Farrington give them money. I caught the name of the other fellow--Mort. I saw old Farrington to bed, and lay down in one of his comfortable garden hammocks to think. When I woke up it was daybreak."

"Why didn't you come to the house and see us?" inquired Mrs. Fairbanks reproachfully.

"Couldn't bring my mind to disturb you, with business on hand," declared Van sturdily. "I hung around, and saw old Farrington go about as if nothing unusual was on the string. Then about noon I went down to the shanty where he had met Slump & Co. No one there. They had moved quarters, it seemed. I nosed around generally. About four o'clock I ran across that Mort. He was visiting some stores. Acted as if it wasn't exactly safe to linger around people, for he didn't lose much time in buying some neckties, collars, cigars, and two new hats."

"He robbed a chum day before yesterday," explained Ralph.

"Oh, that was it? He looked like a thief. I suppose Slump didn't care to show his face at all. Well, I took up the trail of his crony. He started out the west turnpike. I kept safely in the rear. He beat me."

"How?"

"A man came along with a fast team. This fellow, Mort, begged or paid for a lift. They disappeared in a cloud of dust. I went back to town, saw your railroad detective, told him Ike Slump was on the scene, and he is looking for him with a warrant for stealing those brass fittings from the roundhouse. I thought I'd clip Slump's wings for good. It made one the less to watch."

"Whew!" whistled Ralph slowly, "you're action when you get started, Van."

"There is only a little more to tell," continued Van. "I went back to the Farrington place. Just at dusk, who should drive out but old Farrington himself, with his best team hitched to a close carriage. The fates were again against me. He got out by the rear, and he, too, took the west turnpike. I ran for a mile, keeping tab on a cloud of dust. It was no use. I sat down on a log by the roadside to rest. In a few minutes I keeled over double-quick, and lay flat. Farrington was coming back--on foot."

"He had left his team somewhere?"

"That's it. I waited until he was out of sight. Then I reasoned out that this was a very queer proceeding. I made up my mind that somehow he had given that team over into the keeping of his two young scallawag friends. I put for the country. I inquired along half a dozen branching country roads I took. About an hour ago I gave it up, was trudging back for town, when down the road came a team--Farrington's team. One of its drivers flashed a match to light a cigarette. Then I knew my people. I edged aside, but as the carriage flew by I jumped on the rear axle, drew myself up, and tried to look in through the rear little glass window. Someone was lying on the back seat. There was a smell like chloroform in the air.

I managed to climb right up on the smooth, slippery top of the carriage."

"What was your idea?" asked Ralph.

"I hardly knew. Somehow, a quick suspicion came into my mind that the person inside that carriage was Mrs. Davis."

"It was."

"I know that now, sure enough. I crept forward. That fellow, Mort, happened to turn. Our faces came nearly together. I grabbed at him, he at me. He must be a pretty husky specimen. Before I could save myself, he gave me a pull and a fling. I went down between the horses."

Mrs. Fairbanks shuddered, and looked solicitous and alarmed.

"Ike Slump reversed the whip and struck out at me. I dropped into a mud-puddle. For a minute anyhow I was insensible from the blow and the fall. When I picked myself up the team was nowhere in sight. I came back to find out if they had really kidnapped Mrs. Davis, and met you."

Van sat down, pretty well tired out, at the conclusion of his recital. Mrs. Fairbanks looked very serious, Ralph worried and excited.

"Something must be done instantly," Ralph declared.

"Hold on," interrupted Van coolly, "make this strictly my affair, if you please. From what I hear, you need all your time and ability for the splendid railroad service you are doing. You can't corner old Farrington--he's too foxy. You can't overtake Slump & Co.--they've got too good a start. It's a simple matter: Farrington is sending Mrs. Davis out of the way. That team has got to come back. The police will find Ike Slump. They don't dare seriously molest Mrs. Davis. I shall keep on the watch. In the morning I will get word somehow to Farwell Gibson. Then I will devote my time strictly to finding Mrs. Davis, and--I intend to find her."

They closed up the deserted house. Then all three took their way homewards.

"Of course you are coming with us, Van?" said Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Van promptly. "I want to forget all about this worrying business for twelve hours, so as to be fresh and bright for a new trail in the morning. And I'm just pining for a good, thick slice of your home-made bread."

"You shall have it, Van," smiled Mrs. Fairbanks, trying to momentarily put aside her troubles, "and half a mince pie, as well."

"Home-made, too?" interrogated Van, in a famished way.

"Only to-day."

"M-m-m!" mumbled Van ravenously. "I'm homesick for one of your rare, square meals. Hustle, Ralph--lead the way to the royal banquet!"

CHAPTER XVII--A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Ralph was a month old at switch-tower service.

Looking back over thirty days, it seemed more than four weeks, so many varied and important incidents in his career had been crowded into that space of time.

It was a wild, stormy night. Sleet and wind were battering the switch tower windows. Although there was a chill in the air, the lightning was vivid and the thunder roll incessant.

The clock showed even midnight. Ralph for over a week had been on night duty solely. Doc Bortree was laid up with a fever, and Ralph and Jack Knight had been running the place on two shifts.

Since the night of her disappearance, neither Ralph nor his anxious mother had learned a thing as to the fate or whereabouts of Mrs. Davis.

Van had left them the following day. Upon that day, too, Gasper Farrington appeared, imposing and self-contained as ever, driving about the town with his team. It had returned, it seemed, but Ike Slump and Mort Bemis had not. Ralph looked for them and inquired about them at many sources, friendly and unfriendly. They had completely vanished.

Ralph and his mother had many consultations over the situation. The former was for interviewing Farrington. He even suggested going to some lawyer or to the police with his story of the disappearance of Mrs. Davis.

On second thoughts, however, he realized that he had very little tangible evidence implicating the magnate to offer. Farrington was wealthy, influential. To make a mistake at this juncture would be to only strengthen and warn the scheming magnate.

So Ralph concluded to wait patiently, hoping day by day that Van would get some word to them.

A week went by, two of them--no token from Van to show that he was following up the Davis affair.

About the middle of the third week, however, Ralph received a brief note from Van. It had been mailed at Springfield.

"I am laid up at Farwell Gibson's with a sprained ankle," the brief letter ran. "Don't worry. Will soon be on deck again. Things working."

This was pretty vague encouragement, but Ralph was forced to be content with it for the time being.

"There's one thing," he told his mother: "Mr. Gibson knows all that we know, and all that Van knows, and probably a great deal more. He is not the man to be idle in a matter like this. Between them, he and Van will probably do all that can be done in finding Mrs. Davis, and we shall hear from them in due time."

Ralph met Gasper Farrington face to face several times. The magnate did not speak to him. He did, however, look very sneeringly and significantly at the young towerman with a kind of triumphant vindictiveness, Ralph fancied.

Farrington was busy pushing along the work of the switch spur up to his factory. It had progressed rapidly, adding two new levers to the battery that Ralph operated.

Another person Ralph was somewhat interested in crossed his path occasionally. This was Young Slavin. He would simply nod to Ralph, but the old rowdyish swing was gone. There was a strange, grave respect in his manner. When Ralph tried to engage him in any protracted conversation, however, Slavin backed off with an embarrassed excuse about being busy.

Ralph was pretty lonesome and weary that night in the switch tower. A couple of night watchmen had alternately kept him company up to ten o'clock. Since that hour he had been completely alone.

The tracks were comparatively idle. There was a west train at 12.15, the night out mail. The night in express train from the switch was due at 12.05, but was reported delayed by a washout beyond Acton. Behind her was the through freight.

These were all the regulars Ralph had to look out for. About eleven o'clock two trains had come in. The limits tower had given siding directions on one, and a new depot terminal on the other.

This led to a mix-up, nothing worse, but Ralph wondered why the peculiar orders had been given. At 11.30, limits dialed for "Chaser on the way." None came. At 11.15 the telephone called for a double switch on a freight special. It did not show up.

"Strange!" reflected Ralph. "Old Bryson is on duty at the limits. He is exact as a die, and never jokes. Is the electricity playing tricks with the wires, or is some one at the limits spelling Bryson and having some fun with me? Pretty serious

business to fool with, and a pretty bad night to indulge in jokes."

Ralph swung the out rails for the 12.15. He sat down in the comfortable old armchair in ready reach of the telephone and plain sight of the dial, and spread out his lunch for a midnight nibble.

He was just realizing what famous doughnuts his mother made, when the trap came up. Ralph had closed it to shut out the draught.

A familiar head came up from the ladder. Ralph in some wonderment recognized Young Slavin.

"Oh, it's you?" he said pleasantly. "Come in--sit down."

"No, I won't stay," demurred Slavin, shaking his outer coat, which was dripping with wet. "I--you see, I was strolling by. Saw you up here, and thought I'd drop in for a minute."

"I am glad. It is pretty lonesome up here, you know," said Ralph.

He noticed a certain embarrassment in Slavin's manner. It was a queer night and a queer hour for Slavin to select for a stroll. Ralph wondered what really was the motive of his visit.

As Slavin shook his outer coat Ralph caught a gleam of bright red beneath it. He was quite surprised to observe that this was a sweater, bearing the initials "S.A." braided across its front.

"Why, Mr. Slavin," he said with an inquisitive smile, "is that a uniform you are wearing?"

"Why, yes," admitted Slavin, turning as red in the face as the sweater itself--"Salvation Army, you know."

"I thought so. Joined them?"

Slavin fidgeted, and regarded Ralph suspiciously from the corner of one eye to see if he was laughing at him. Ralph preserved a reassuring gravity on purpose.

"N-no," said Slavin. "You see, I got tired of that mob I was training with. They borrowed and stole all I earned."

"I am glad you have left them," said Ralph.

"Thought you would be, and thought I'd come and tell you," stammered Slavin in a floundering way. "Oh, I'm playing no goody-goody act. I am just holding my mouth, and watching those preacher fellows at the army barracks. They're all right. Wish I was. 'Live and let live,' I told them, when some rowdies pelted them and smashed a hole in their big bass drum. So, just at present I am acting as their bouncer."

"Good for you!" commended Ralph heartily.

"You know I can bounce all right?" said Slavin significantly. "Well, I must be going. So long. Oh, say--by the way, Fairbanks."

It was evident to Ralph that Slavin was now about to reveal the real motive of his midnight call.

"I wanted to ask you," proceeded Slavin, rather lamely--"has anyone been troubling you lately?"

"Why, no," answered Ralph in quick surprise at the pointed inquiry--"but who, for instance?"

"Mort Bemis, for one. And do you know the fellow he went off with?"

"You mean Ike Slump?"

"That's his name. Look out for him--for both of them. I'll do the rest," rather emphatically observed Slavin, doubling up his fist till it resembled the hammering end of a big sledge.

"It seems strange, your asking me about them," remarked Ralph. "I would like very much to know where they are at present."

"You would? I can tell you--they are right here in Stanley Junction. I'm laying for them. That's why I'm up so late. I know they have it in for you."

"Why?"

"Oh, on general principles of meanness. That's why I came to warn you. I think," continued Slavin with a dangerous gleam in his eye, "I think I'll get there first. Don't you worry--I'm pretty sure to head them off. Only keep an eye open."

"Thank you," said Ralph. "So they are back in town? Are they going about openly?"

"They came late this afternoon. A friend told me he saw them driving along in a cab, fixed up reckless. He said they had on the latest new togs, diamond pins, kid gloves, et settery, till you couldn't rest."

"I should think that was rather venturesome on Slump's part," said Ralph.

"You mean, because there's a warrant out for him on that old junk-stealing case?"

"Yes," answered Ralph.

"It's settled."

"It's--what?" demanded Ralph in profound astonishment.

"Settled--at least fixed up in some way."

"How do you know?" inquired Ralph skeptically.

"Adair, the road detective, told a crossings man, boiling hot over it. Said that Slump had gone to the justice, put in an appearance, and was bound over to next court term."

"Why," said Ralph, "that looks incredible. He would have to give bonds."

"Yes, five hundred dollars' bail. He gave it, right enough. Bondsman was right there. The thing had been cut and dried beforehand."

"Who was his bondsman--did you learn?" asked Ralph.

"Sure--it was old Gasper Farrington."

CHAPTER XVIII--A DESPERATE CHANCE

"Gasper Farrington again!" cried Ralph.

His thoughts ran rapidly. At a good many turns of late, it seemed, the miserly magnate of Stanley Junction was coming into his life.

To Ralph the solution of the present problem was prompt and logical: Farrington probably had the unfortunate Mrs. Davis in his power. He had hired Mort Bemis and Ike Slump to kidnap her. Now he himself was at the mercy and in the clutches of his conscienceless confederates.

Ralph theorized that he had paid his accomplices a goodly sum of money for their assistance. For a time, with plenty of ready cash in their possession, they had found diversion in the city. The longing to cut a dash at home, however, had brought them back to Stanley Junction.

It looked as if Slump had set a price for his silence and secrecy regarding the magnate's schemes. He had probably demanded that Farrington go on his bail bond, and afterwards stand back of him in the trial with his wealth and influence.

"I am very much obliged to you for what you have told me, Slavin," said Ralph at last. "Also for your kindly intentions toward me. If I were you, though, I wouldn't go getting into trouble with those two fellows."

"Trouble?" cried Slavin wrathfully. "I want to get back my medals. Say, if those fellows who stole them have sold them where I can't get them, or melted them down, I'll pretty near cripple them for life. But you mind what I came to tell you. They hate you, and they'll try and trap you. So, you watch out close. As I say, I'll do the rest. I'm going."

"Good-night, Slavin," answered Ralph, extending his hand.

Slavin started at the sight of it. He flushed, looked pleased, and his big broad paw shot out.

"You honor me," he said, "and I'm proud of it. Oh, say--'sense! 'sense!"

"Excuse what?" demanded Ralph calmly, with a twinkle in his eye.

Slavin had unconsciously given Ralph the crushing hand-shake that used to lay up unsuspicious new acquaintances for a week. To his surprise the grip was returned with equal force. Ralph did not even wince.

"You're a good one," pronounced Slavin, in genuine admiration. "I thought I'd hurt you."

"Pulling those levers is a great muscle-builder," explained Ralph.

"Looks so, in your case," admitted Slavin. "Say," he added, in a kind of longing sigh, his eyes sparkling as they ran the grim battery of switch pullers--"there's my ambition in life."

"What's that, Slavin--tower duty?"

"Oh, anything in the railroad line, from pulling up piles to driving spikes," declared Slavin, swinging his big arms about restlessly. "There's no bad in me. I'd love to work. Only, you see, I was born strong, and something has kept me pushing my muscle to the fore. It led to encouraging me to be a bruiser. I tell you, if I had a job like this, where I could work off the extra steam, I'd just make a record."

"Then--why not?" inquired Ralph.

"You mean, why not get the job?" exclaimed Slavin in an eager breath.

"Exactly."

"Would they have me?"

"Again, why not?" said Ralph--"if you are in earnest."

"Oh, am I!"

"I'll speak to Mr. Knight. I will do more. I will ask the depot master to take your application, Slavin," said Ralph earnestly, laying a gentle hand on the big fellow's shoulder, "you have shown yourself a man to-night. Keep it up, and"--Ralph smiled significantly as he quoted Slavin's own recent words--"I'll do the rest."

Slavin dashed an impetuous hand across his eyes. They had filled with a suspicious moisture. He evidently could not trust himself to speak further, for as he started down the trap ladder he only waved Ralph a clumsy, silent adieu.

The episode of Young Slavin's visit had been a pleasant diversion to the monotony of the hour Ralph pulled the out switch for the 12.15 mail. Then he sat down again and finished his lunch.

The storm raged on with unabated fury. There was nothing to do now until morning except to watch out for the night express and the regular freight.

The express, Ralph knew, was stalled by a wash-out beyond Acton. Naturally the freight, blocked behind it, could not get through until the road was cleared. Ralph walked up and down the tower for exercise. Suddenly he threw up a window.

Some moving lanterns over on the repair trade attracted his attention. Their

flare and that of the lightning showed him three men getting a handcar in to service. One of them ran up to the tower and made a trumpet of his hands.

"Give us the out track," he called.

"All right," answered Ralph

"Train ditched--wrecking crew ordered out."

"Yes, I know--the wash-out at Acton," said Ralph--"the in express."

"No, the outmail--just beyond the limits."

"What!" cried Ralph in a startled tone.

He kept at the levers until he saw the handcar speed safely down the main rails. Then he ran to the telephone and called up the limits tower.

There was no action, and no response.

"That's bad," murmured Ralph--"fuse burned out. The lightning has put the 'phone out of commission. I wish I understood things straight. Two trains delayed by the wash-out. The mail ditched. Bad shape all around, this, for such a night."

Ralph wished he could run up to the dispatcher's office and get more information at the depot. This he dared not do, however. He paced up and down restlessly, wondering how serious the mishap to the mail might be.

It was precisely one o'clock when the dial hand moved with a kind of an electric tang. It circled and then shot back, as if directed by an erratic hand.

Ralph watched it intently. That dial disc was his only present reliable communication with the outside railroad world. The pointer vibrated, then halted.

"Through freight, track 7," it directed.

"Why," exclaimed Ralph, "that can't be! The through freight is stalled at Acton behind the express, and--why, she's coming now!"

He could hardly believe his eyes. Usually a minute and a half elapsed before a train announced at the limits showed coming around the curve.

Now, boring the water-laden air with a quiver that showed full speed, a great laboring headlight glared along the in tracks.

Had Ralph caught her sooner, he could have switched onto any one of the half a dozen tracks which were empty. She was now past all the main switches, however, except the in passenger track 7 and inside 6.

"It is No. 3, the through freight, sure enough," said Ralph, recognizing the approaching train with the intuitive sense of experience. The headlight, the sway of the ponderous locomotive, the very sound of the long train, vague as it was, told a sure story to his practiced eye and ear.

"She must have got around the wash-out and ahead of the express," said Ralph. "Why, there's some mistake at the limits. She should have been given the long freight siding, and she has passed it, and--track 7. It's in use!"

Ralph, darting to the levers, uttered these words in a great hollow shout.

Lever 7, operating the switches of that set of rails, had a card hung to its

handle. These cards were always used nights as a guide to the levermen, where any special, extra, or transient cars, passenger or freight, were stationary.

The sight of the card recalled a startling fact to Ralph: at the depot end of track 7 lay the occupied tourist car of an Uncle Tom's Cabin theatrical troupe which was then visiting Stanley Junction.

"Something wrong at limits--everything wrong here!" panted Ralph, his heart suddenly beating like a trip-hammer. "What shall I do?"

He shot a glance at the nearing headlight. Relying on limits signals, evidently expecting the long freight siding, in the darkness and storm taking no note of outside switches, and behind time, those in charge of the through freight had nearly full speed set.

Ralph felt the blood leave his face. Through his mind in rapid sequence ran the plat of switches at the depot yards.

"No. 6, or destruction!" he gasped. "I've got to make the choice. It's the only track open. Open--no!" he added, with a new thrill of apprehension, "but--there's no other way."

He pulled the lever that would send the through freight down track 6. Then a wild tumult seized him. He darted for the trap. He almost fell the length of the iron-runged ladder. Then Ralph sprang through the doorway and tore across the tracks.

Track 6 was not empty. At its bumpered end were three old empty freights. Ralph, however, counted their destruction as of little consequence as compared with a crash on track 7 into the theatre car, holding perhaps a dozen sleeping inmates. He had made an independent choice. He had saved them. Now, if possible, to save the freight train from a collision!

As he passed the switch he tore from a pivot the signal lantern resting there. Carrying it in his arms, he dashed forward diagonally to meet the rushing freight. Extending its red slide, he waved frantically up and down and across, yelling at the top of his voice.

The locomotive of the through freight whizzed by him. In the blur of rain and radiance Ralph fancied a grizzled head was poked out through the cab window. At all events he caught the quick, harsh whistle of the air brakes. A jolt shook the long freights. His signal had been observed.

Following the locomotive with his eye, Ralph saw, three hundred yards further on, a figure suddenly cleave the air. The engineer had put on full stop brakes and had jumped.

The train was slowing up. Would she stop in time? Car after car whirled by. Then crash! Far ahead, the last car past him, Ralph caught the ominous sound, and shivered and gasped.

CHAPTER XIX--THE DOUBLE WRECK

Ralph Fairbanks had disobeyed orders.

That was the first overwhelming thought that rushed through the young leverman's mind. He stood in the midst of the storm, still clasping the red switch light.

The echo of that ominous crash was in his ears. Louder and fiercer, it seemed, thumping away at his heart with a dull, depressing force, was the realization that he had violated the stringent instructions of his superior, Jack Knight: "Never disobey orders!"

Something had been wrong at the limits tower--hence, two wrecks within sixty minutes. But that was not Ralph's business. Limits had ordered track 7. He had sent the through freight down track 6. No matter what humane sense had prompted his choice, the railroad régime was strictly inviolable. There had been a wreck, how bad he did not yet know, and he was responsible for it.

The freight had come to a stop. Lanterns now began to flit in its vicinity. Above the raging tumult of the storm, vague shouts reached Ralph's ear.

A brakeman, carrying a lantern, came rushing towards him.

"What has happened?" asked Ralph faintly.

"Towerman?" queried the brakeman sharply, flashing the lantern in Ralph's face. "Only a shake-up at my end. What's ahead, I don't know. Nothing coming behind?"

"No--get me word how bad the smash-up is, will you?" and, recalled to his duty by the brakeman's appearance, Ralph hurried back to the tower.

He closed the switch on track 6. Then, somewhat faint and badly worried, he sank into the armchair. Nothing was due on regular schedule. The express was reported stalled. Still, so many strange mix-ups had occurred during the night, that Ralph watched the dial, on the keen edge of suspense and distraction.

"Hello!" he cried finally, and started to his feet in wonder.

The dial disc transfixed his glance. It had begun to work. Within thirty seconds it indicated as many varied orders. It scheduled freights, passengers, "chasers." It called for one switch after another.

In stupefaction Ralph watched the brass index finger flit, whirl, and tremble. Then it circled round and round several times, vibrated at "blank," and rested there.

"Why!" gasped the stupefied Ralph, "am I crazy, or is someone else at the other end of the line?"

Voices below made Ralph start, listen, and watch. A grimed face came up through the trap. Ralph recognized the fireman of the through freight.

"Quick!" he spoke--"how bad?"

"Three empty freights kindling wood, front of the engine stove in," reported the fireman.

"No one hurt?"

"Not a soul."

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Ralph presently.

"I jumped, after the shutting down of the air brakes," went on the fireman. "So did Foster. But say, kid, why in the world didn't you give us the long siding?"

"Orders from limits for 7," explained Ralph. "It was a desperate chance. I took it, and gave you 6, for 7 was in use with a sleeper. Are you going to the depot? Please tell the dispatcher our 'phone is burned out, something wrong at limits, and to send to me for a report right away."

"There's a mix-up all along the line, the way things look," observed the fireman, disappearing.

Ralph took up a position at an open window. He watched the lanterns bobbing along the tracks and at the depot.

He was unnerved and in a direful condition of suspense. Only the glad thought that no loss of life attended the collision sustained him.

The train dispatcher's assistant put in an appearance in about twenty minutes. He looked flustered as he told Ralph that they had two wrecks on their hands.

Ralph made his report clearly, concisely. His visitor looked astonished as he learned of the amazing gyrations of the signal dial.

"You're a brick, just the same, Fairbanks!" said the man, as Ralph concluded his report. "If the freight had got track 7, there would have been a fine slaughter for the railroad company to pay for."

"I disobeyed orders," observed Ralph in a depressed tone.

"Whose orders?"

"Limits."

"Limits seems to have made a fine mess of it all along the line, and we are going to find out why, very promptly."

"I wish you would send a messenger for Mr. Knight," said Ralph. "I think he ought to be here to straighten things out."

"We have done that already."

"Look--see!" cried Ralph suddenly.

The dial began its strange manifestations again. The man from the dispatcher's office started, gulped, and with a mutter of astonishment and concern ran down the trap ladder.

The depot yards became a scene of activity as the minutes wore on.

The seriousness of the occasion, with three trains out of service, called for immediate attention. Handcars were flitting hither and thither. Ralph was kept busy sending them on their way.

The master mechanic, depot master, and Jack Knight made up one handcar load. Two engines with tackle and relief cars came down from the roundhouse, lining up at the side of the through freight.

Ralph was fully watchful and employed for the next hour. Then he became dreadfully anxious. A handcar bolted right under the windows of the switch tower. The master mechanic and Jack Knight got off, and came up the ladder a minute later.

Ralph stood holding to the armchair, a picture of suspense. The master mechanic looked grave and bothered. On the contrary, bluff and hearty as ever, Knight came forward. He grasped Ralph by both shoulders, swinging him backwards and forwards in a playful, encouraging way.

"Shake, old fellow!" he sang out, slipping one hand down one arm and gripping Ralph's fingers heartily.

"Why?" asked Ralph with a half-smile. "Good-bye? I suppose that is the programme for me," he added, with an anxious look at the master mechanic.

"What's that?" demanded old Jack keenly. "Oh, on account of the through freight? Humph! If the Great Northern don't appreciate the wise, wide-awake common sense that saw the difference between three old box cars and eleven precious human lives, I'll take my walking papers instanter. Is that right, Mr. Blake?" challenged Knight.

"Yes," nodded the master mechanic, "your sentiment is right, Mr. Knight. I have nothing but praise for the good judgment young Fairbanks has shown."

"But I disobeyed orders," suggested Ralph in an uncertain tone.

"Orders?" sniffed Knight--"yes, luckily! A crazy man's order."

"Why, what do you mean?" inquired Ralph in perplexity.

"What I say. For three hours the limits tower has been in charge of a stark, raving lunatic--the Great Northern railroad system the plaything of a madman. Never has this company been so near wreck and ruin. And you, Fairbanks," added the veteran towerman, with a tender, fatherly touch on the arm of his young

protégé--"you saved your end of the line!"

CHAPTER XX--THE CRAZY ORDERS

All Stanley Junction was agog with the story of the "crazy" train orders the day after the storm.

It was one of the most remarkable occurrences of risk and danger ever known in the history of the Great Northern.

Expert railroad men looked grave, as the facts came out. Citizens generally shuddered, as they realized how nearly the caprice of a mad leverman had come to causing wide-spread death and disaster.

Ralph Fairbanks himself was thrilled and amazed, as he learned from Jack Knight's lips the facts of the case.

From ten o'clock the evening the storm until nearly two o'clock the ensuing morning, a madman had controlled the Great Northern train system at Stanley Junction, out and in.

For over three hours, therefore, Ralph, at the depot switch tower, had been the plaything of a crazed, delirious human being, who, by force and cunning, had usurped the place of trusty, experienced old Joe Bryson.

This was the way it had all come about:

When the master mechanic and Jack Knight reached the limits tower after the report of the double wreck, they had found it in total darkness.

The ladder trap was bolted. They had to break the trap open. Entering the tower room and securing a light, they discovered a strange and startling condition of affairs.

Lying on the floor in a heavy, leaden sleep, was Bryson. Crouching in a corner, with lurid eyes, physical strength exhausted, but raving in wild delirium, was Doc Bortree.

The telephone receiver was smashed, and the transmitter lay torn loose, wires and all, on the floor. Other parts of the tower equipment were in rare disorder. The west levers were set in all kinds of erratic and impracticable shapes.

It took the two railroad men fully half an hour to restore order from the chaos in the tower and along the tracks. It took them double that time to arouse Bryson, and to get Bortree into a state of partial coherency. They sent messengers to Bortree's home. They listened to Bryson's confused story. Then, putting this and that together, they finally got the truth of affairs. Doc Bortree, as Ralph knew, had been confined to his bed with a high fever for nearly a week. That was why, compelled to share two long shifts with Knight alone, Ralph happened to be on all-night duty at the present time.

It seemed that early in the evening, Bortree's sister had left her brother sleeping quietly. He appeared to be on the mend.

About ten o'clock the sick leverman must have had a relapse into delirium. Railroad service was his daily routine. His brain, running in that line, had suggested to him a whimsical and irrational course. This he had carried out with all the cunning of a real madman.

He had taken a bottle of cordial and had poured into it a sleeping potion. He had got into his clothes, left the room by opening a window, and, breasting the violent tempest, had made for and reached the limits tower.

Joe Bryson afterwards, in telling his story, said that the bedraggled appearance of Bortree was startling enough. His actions were quite lucid, however. All he noticed peculiar about his talk was the persistency and strange delight with which Bortree alluded to an order he expected to receive from the superintendent to take charge of the entire train dispatching service the next day.

When Bortree produced the bottle and told that it was a mild, pleasant wine the doctor had prescribed for him, Bryson indulged in a glass--"for companionship's sake." Then he remembered nothing further until awakened by the master mechanic and Jack Knight.

As soon as Bortree had disposed of his companion, he began his mad, riotous work.

All kinds of exaggerated ideas must have filled his mind. The reader has already seen how his crazy orders operated. His own work at the limits had ditched the midnight mail. His instructions to Ralph had sent the through freight crashing into the three freight empties at terminus.

Finally, exhausted after his mad work at the levers, Bortree had commenced a work of general destruction. When through, he had extinguished the lights and lapsed into a weak delirium in which the two railroad men had finally found him.

"There should always be a team at the limits tower," was Knight's ultimate comment on the affair.

"Yes," the master mechanic assented--"sickness, enmity, a burned-out wire, a dozen things might come up where one man would be helpless. If it is only a messenger, we must not again leave these important points at the mercy of chance

and accident."

Ralph made a note of this suggestion. He determined when the right moment came to speak a good word for Young Slavin.

He had never been more tired and sleepy than when he reached home that morning.

Ralph ate a hurried breakfast. He explained only casually the happenings of the night to his mother. Getting to bed promptly, he put in ten hours of the solidest sleep that he had ever enjoyed.

He found his mother quite nervous and worried when he reported for his late afternoon dinner. Mrs. Fairbanks had learned from a neighbor of the startling occurrences of the previous night.

"I am all unstrung over this railroad business, Ralph," she said. "I would feel easier in my mind if you could transfer to some branch of the service where you were not constantly meeting these terrible dangers."

"What! my own dear mother going back on me in the midst of my ambitions!" cried Ralph in a tone of playful raillery. "Oh, surely, never! I hope you wouldn't advise me to follow old Farrington's grand suggestion--for his own benefit; get a clerical position at the general offices at Springfield, and--as he puts it--'be a gentleman.'"

"No, Ralph, I should not like to have you leave Stanley Junction, where you have made such a good record," responded Mrs. Fairbanks, "but think of the fearful responsibilities of your position."

"I do," answered Ralph gravely, "and that is why I am going to stick. Mother, someone has to face these serious issues. Perhaps my clear head, and willing hands, and genuine love for the business, fit me to be just the person to fill the gap when these unavoidable troubles come along. Besides, if someone does not go through the apprenticeship, where will the service be when Jack Knight and the other old hands have retired? I want to be, as I expect to be, a thorough railroad man," pursued Ralph with resolution, "and first-class, or nothing. In order to do so, I must know every step of the service, from roundhouse to train dispatcher's desk. I have started up the ladder. I can't afford to slip one rung. If I get jolted, I intend to hang on all the closer."

The widow was silent. Her son's earnest determination consoled her, somehow. Yes, she reflected, Ralph had braved perils and had saved the lives of others, where one less brave and self-reliant might have failed. So far he had proven himself "the right man in the right place." Secretly she murmured a fervent prayer for his safety and guidance, and tried to be content until he should reach smoother and less risky paths of service.

Ralph received an official assurance from the superintendent through loyal old Jack Knight that afternoon, that his action in dealing with the crazy orders

had won the highest commendation of the railroad company.

The following day he spoke about Young Slavin to Knight. The next day the latter informed him that on the first of the month the master mechanic had agreed to pass on the application which Slavin was to file in the meantime. Nothing unforseen happening, it looked as if the sturdy young pugilist would speedily have a chance to exercise his muscle in some department of the Great Northern service.

Pleasant routine succeeded for some days for Ralph to the exciting episodes of the week previous. Some changes were made on the limits tower, and the day man there transferred to the depot yards.

Ralph was back on the shift he preferred; four hours in the morning, and four hours in the afternoon.

He had not heard again from Van. As to Mort Bemis and Ike Slump, they had flashed into town, thrown away a lot of money along lower Railroad Street, and had again disappeared.

Ralph met Slavin one day. The latter was delighted over the prospect of soon getting at work for the railroad company. His face scowled, however, as Ralph asked if he had seen or heard anything concerning Ike and Mort.

"Why, yes," answered Slavin, "I heard they were cutting a dash up at the racetrack at Springfield. Plenty of money, and bragging that they owned a rich old magnate here at Stanley Junction. I'd go gunning for them, if I wasn't waiting to hear from my railroad job."

"Oh, leave them alone--why bother your head about them?" suggested Ralph.

"No, Fairbanks," dissented Slavin stubbornly. "I want those medals, or I want their hides. I'm not a good enough Salvationer just yet to forgive those villains. I can't wipe them off the slate till I've had one last round with them."

Gasper Farrington had completed the switch spur to the factory. Ralph learned that he had invited a heavy damage suit by crossing the lot of a poor old invalid widow, who occupied a house next to that where Mrs. Davis had formerly lived.

He heard a good many comments on this last act of the selfish, tyrannical magnate. There was some current criticism, too, as to his going on the bonds of the idle scapegrace, Ike Slump. Farrington pretended that he had bailed out Ike because his father was an old acquaintance. Ralph knew better, but held his peace. He had faith that the real truth would come out, sooner or later.

With entire confidence in Van Sherwin, he believed that he would soon receive some word from that good friend to show he had been quietly working in the dark all this time.

About five o'clock one afternoon a barefooted urchin Ralph did not know

by name came up the switch tower ladder. Ralph was alone, but expected Knight to relieve him at five o'clock.

"Say," projected the frowsy-headed lad, staring curiously around the place, "you Mr. Fairbanks?"

"That's right, my little man," answered Ralph.

"Say, you know Mr. Stiggs?"

"Slightly," nodded Ralph, with a smile.

"Well, he sent me here. He said to fetch a message to you."

Ralph recalled the fact now that Mr. Stiggs had not shown up about the yards for the past two days. This was an unusual thing for the old railroad pensioner.

"Is Mr. Stiggs sick?" he inquired with interest.

"Dunno," answered the youngster. "It was his wife I talked with. She said Mr. Stiggs would like to have you call about seven o'clock, if convenient. He wants to see you."

"Very well," said Ralph. "Are you to see her again?"

"Why, I can."

"Then tell her I will drop around at seven o'clock this evening."

The urchin lingered. He was a shrewd-faced little fellow.

"Say," he again projected, "Mrs. Stiggs didn't have any change."

"Didn't have--oh, I see!" laughed Ralph. "All right, son--there's a nickel."

Ralph thought little of this incident for the remainder of the afternoon. He fancied that Stiggs might be indisposed, and had some mission for him to execute.

He went home, ate his supper, and strolled slowly in the direction of the Stiggs home about dusk.

There was a light in the rear room, and the front door was open. Ralph knocked.

"Come in," sounded a vague direction from the little front parlor.

Ralph stepped into the hall and crossed the threshold of the parlor. He made out a figure dimly, standing by a chair.

"That you, Mr. Stiggs?" he observed. "Pretty dark here. Hold on--what is this?"

Ralph started back. The figure behind him had made a jump and had seized either arm of the youth by the wrist.

At the same moment a second person sprang from the shadows behind Ralph. A rope encircled the young leverman's body, and Ralph Fairbanks was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXI--IKE SLUMPS "NUTCRACKER"

Ralph was taken completely off his guard. He struggled violently, but his assailants had the advantage.

One of them pinioned his arms. The other tied the rope about them. A second rope was whipped about his ankles, and secured.

"Push him down," spoke a quick voice.

They half-lifted, half-dropped their prisoner. Ralph was thrust down into an old easy-chair.

"Now then, shut the door and fetch the lamp," was the next order.

Ralph was too astonished to say anything for a minute or two. One of his captors flitted from the room. The front door slammed shut. Then the fellow ran to the kitchen and brought in a lamp and placed it on a table.

"Well," he said with a great chuckling guffaw, "how's Mr. Ralph Fairbanks?"

"Slump--Ike Slump, eh?" spoke Ralph calmly, but following a start of some surprise.

"Don't miss me, Ralphy," suggested Slump's companion in a tone of sneering mockery.

"And Mort Bemis?" added Ralph coolly. "Good-evening, gentlemen--what can I do for you?"

"Nervy!" sneered Slump--"but it won't last. It's what we're going to do that will interest you, Ralph Fairbanks."

Ralph looked over the enemy with a steadfast glance. They were certainly "dressed to kill." He noticed that their clothing was of the most expensive grade. For all that, it was disordered and ill-fitting.

They looked as they had not slept regularly for a week, and when they did, seemed to have made any old place their resting-spot. Their faces bore marks of dissipation.

Their whole bearing indicated that the money they had recently come into had helped them down the road of idleness and crime.

"We've come back to the Junction specially to see you," observed Bemis, sinking upon a sofa opposite their helpless prisoner.

"Yes, unfinished business, ha! ha!" jeered Ike Slump, looking mightily bad and vicious as he proceeded to light a cigarette. "We owe you one, as you'll perhaps remember. You put the police onto me."

Ralph had not done this. As the reader knows, it was the act of Van Sherwin. Ralph, however, did not care to enlighten his captors as to the real facts of the case.

"And you stole my job from me," added Mort Bemis savagely. "You've put Young Slavin up to queer us, too."

"So," resumed Slump, "seeing we did one good job for a certain liberal gentleman in Stanley Junction, we'll try and please him in another. At the same time, we get good and even with you for ourselves."

"I can easily guess you might please Gasper Farrington with anything that means harm to me, if that is what you are getting at," observed Ralph pointedly.

"Who mentioned Farrington?" demanded Slump.

"He went on your bond. It is pretty easy to guess you are in cahoots with him in some way," bluntly retorted Ralph.

Mort Bemis got up from his seat and strode up and down the room. Through a long tirade of his fancied wrongs, he worked himself up into a seething fury, real or pretended. Ralph's cool unconcern nettled him. Once or twice he referred to the saving of the limited, and to other acts that had made Ralph popular and his friends proud of him.

"You robbed me of my chance," he snarled. "If I'd have been on deck, your luck would have fallen to me. I'm out for revenge. I'm going to pay you off."

"With bluff and blow?" demanded Ralph sarcastically.

Bemis leaned over and slapped Ralph's face.

"Don't you sass me!" he gritted out. "It won't be healthy for you."

"You're a mean coward!" said Ralph. "Give me a free show, and we'll see who is the better man."

"I'll show you something!" snapped Bemis venomously. "Do you know what we are going to do with you? I'm going to fix you, Ralph Fairbanks, so you will never crow over me--you'll never pull another lever."

"Jaw less--get into action," directed Ike Slump tartly.

"Where's the fixtures?"

"Here they are."

Ike reached over to a chair and picked up something that jangled. Ralph regarded the trap-like apparatus disclosed with some interest.

Bemis took it from the hand of his associate.

"Do you know what this is?" he inquired of Ralph.

"I don't."

"It's a nutcracker, see?"

Ike grinned as if that was a big joke.

"You're the funniest fellow in the world, Mort!" he chuckled gleesomely.

The instrument Bemis displayed somewhat resembled a nutcracker. It opened and was operated by hand pressure. It had fine grooves. These tallied to the fingers on a human hand.

"They used that on the scabs, the time of the big railroad strike," exclaimed Bemis grimly. "The strikers did."

Ralph started. He recognized the "nutcracker" now. It was one of the brutal instruments of torture that had been used to terrify and cripple the men who had taken the places of the strikers, during the labor troubles on the Great Northern about a year back.

"We put your hand in these grooves," proceeded Bemis. "Crack! Your knuckles are gone. See? The man who can pull a lever ever afterwards is a dandy. See?"

"I see," nodded Ralph, his lips set firmly, though his heart misgave him. "Do you mean, Mort Bemis, brute, coward, and traitor, to the honest workingman's cause, that you intend to maim me for life to satisfy a low, paltry spirit of revenge?"

"Mr. Ralph Fairbanks," declared Bemis coolly, "I--mean--just--that."

"Have you considered what this job is likely to cost you?" inquired Ralph.

"It didn't cost the strikers anything," jeered Ike.

"I am not mixed up in any strike," observed Ralph. "I warn you I have good friends, and any such fiendish act as that you contemplate will send them on your track to the ends of the earth."

"That'll do," growled Bemis. "Grab his hand--the right one, Ike."

"Got it--he's easy to handle," said Slump.

The young towerman was indeed easy to handle, for the reason that his arms were securely surrounded by the ropes, both above and below the elbows.

Ike seized the wrist of Ralph's right hand and Bemis advanced with the "nutcracker."

A cold shiver ran over Ralph as his fingers were encased in the grooves of the iron hand.

He remembered having once seen a victim of the strike, a poor fellow who had gone around with the knuckles of one hand twisted so out of shape that he would never be able to straighten out his fingers again.

Ralph could not resist. If he shouted for help, he knew that he would be brutally silenced. He thought of his mother, of the bright ambitions about to be wrecked by two worthless, cruel enemies.

Then Ralph closed his eyes. He set his lips firmly, and silently prayed that

his wicked inquisitors would not dare carry out fully their announced programme.

"I'm ready," sounded Bemis' heartless tones.

"So am I," chorused Ike. "You'll wish you'd minded your own business and let us alone, Ralph Fairbanks."

Bemis began to put the pressure on the vile instrument of torture. Ralph's breath came quick. He felt his fingers compress.

Chug!

Ralph strained his hearing at the new sound. He opened his eyes with a thrill.

The pressure on his hand was relaxed. The "nutcracker," released by Bemis with strange suddenness, dangled at Ralph's finger tips for an instant. Then it dropped harmless to the carpet with a dull clang.

Ralph saw something cleave the air directly in front of him. It was a human fist. It met the broad, astonished face of Mort Bemis squarely.

That shuddering, sickening sound echoed out. It reminded Ralph of the noise made by a boy playing with a big lump of clay, and spatting it violently against a wooden fence.

He saw Bemis fall back with a roar of awful pain. In that fleeting glimpse, it looked to Ralph as if Mort's face had been flattened out from ear to ear. His nose seemed to have disappeared In its place was a vague red blotch of color.

Bemis fell flat backwards, his head striking a chair and smashing off its arm.

"You next!" shouted a terrible voice.

Ike Slump had already dropped Ralph's hand. With a sharp cry of alarm he tried to dodge back.

Again that great fist swung forward. Ralph turned pale, and he felt his flesh creep.

As he looked, he saw Ike Slump reeling. There was a ghostly grin on his face. His whole lower row of teeth was gone.

"I said I'd do it," spoke Ralph's rescuer and the assailant of his enemies, "and I've kept my word."

Young Slavin proceeded to liberate Ralph from the ropes that bound him.

CHAPTER XXII--A HEADSTRONG FRIEND

Ralph was faint and dizzy-headed with all that had transpired in the last twenty minutes.

He felt that he had been in the peril of his life. He bestowed a look of immense gratitude on Slavin.

"You came in time," said he. "How shall I ever thank you?"

"Cut it out," growled Slavin grimly. "I ain't through yet. I've been watching these skunks for an hour or more. I knew that Stiggs, who has gone on a little jaunt with his wife to see some relations, would never give those reptiles the free run of his house. I fancied burglary at first. Then when you came I knew it was something deeper. Well, it's the finishing touch. I suppose, in your usual soft-hearted way, you want to beg them off from further punishment, don't you?"

"It strikes me they have got about all the punishment they can stand at present," suggested Ralph.

"O, that's just a starter," announced Slavin. "Keep your eye on Slump for a minute."

Ike had fallen across the sofa. He was moaning and half-stunned. He kept moving his hand over his bare and tingling gums, making a horrible, hollow, hissing sound every time his breath exuded.

"The dentist for you," said Slavin in cold unconcern. "This one is delegated to the hospital, I guess."

The speaker approached the prostrate Bemis.

"Speak up, there," growled Slavin savagely. "I've a little business with you, Mort Bemis. Where are those two silver medals that you stole from me?"

Bemis only wriggled and groaned. Slavin kicked him. He sat up with a howl of pain.

"Pawned," he whimpered.

"Where?"

"At Barry's cigar store."

"For how much?"

"Two dollars."

"Hand it over."

"I haven't a cent. Oh, you've half killed me. Oh, my head! my head! Don't--don't hit me again. Slump has some money. Pay him, Ike, pay him."

Slavin advanced from Bemis, now sitting up on the floor, towards Ike, with a menacing manner.

"I'll pay, I'll pay," whined Ike. "Here, here. I haven't go any change. Five dollars," and with celerity he extended a banknote.

"Three for delay and damages," stated Slavin, coolly pocketing the money. "Now then, you two, walk humble, or I'll finish this job right here and now."

Slavin took up the ropes that had bound Ralph. Quaking with mortal terror, Bemis and Slump in turn allowed him unresistingly to tie their arms behind them.

Slavin picked up the "nutcracker." He looked it over and placed it in his pocket.

"If that bit of evidence don't send you over the road, I know what will," he observed grimly. "March."

He forced the two prisoners forward, holding to an arm of each. As they got outside, Ralph asked:

"What are you going to do with them, Slavin?"

"Anxious to know, are you?"

"Yes."

"Then keep us company, and see. Oh, I'm not sassy, Fairbanks. I'm only doing what you ought to have done the first break they made at you--called in the law. These fellows are dangerous. I'm going to cage them."

The prisoners spoke not a word. Bemis had received a fearful fistic punishment, and was blubbering. Ike Slump kept up a mumbling sound with his lips, as if trying to get used to the lack of teeth.

Slavin led them through the town by dark and unfrequented streets. When they reached the railroad tracks, he made for a crossings shanty.

The flagman had gone home for the night, but the door was secured by a catch only. Slavin marched his prisoners inside, drew a lantern from under a bench, pushed them to the bench, and lit the lantern.

"You rest a while," he directed them. "Court will open soon. Fairbanks, will you do an errand for me?"

"What is it, Slavin?"

"I promised the road detective, Bob Adair, to send him word when I found these fellows."

"I'm out on bail. They can't bother me till my trial comes off," mumbled Ike

Slump, making a grimacing, painful job of talking intelligently.

"Rest easy," advised Slavin grimly. "This is quite another round. Find him, Fairbanks."

"You think that is best, do you?" inquired Ralph. "These fellows----"

"See here, Fairbanks!" cried Slavin, almost angrily, "you'd actually let them go, after they had pretty nigh put you out of commission forever. In this case I don't want your advice, good as it usually is. I know my programme, and I intend to carry it out to the last letter."

Ralph saw that it was useless to oppose his vigorous friend and champion. He left the shanty forthwith, and went up to the depot. It was some time before he could locate Mr. Adair. When he finally found him, and explained simply that Slavin wished to see him, the road detective joined him briskly, and look pleased.

"About Slump, I suppose?" he inquired eagerly.

"I think it is," answered Ralph.

"Good," said Adair. "The company thinks that bailing out business was rushed through. The bond was only five hundred dollars. They don't understand old Farrington's peculiar interest in the matter, and we have been ready to rearrest Slump for a week."

Adair gave prodigious start as, entering the crossings shanty, his eyes lit on the faces of Slavin's two prisoners.

"Whew!" he whistled slowly--"you seem to have had some trouble with your friends, Mr. Slavin."

"You hear my story, and see if I gave them any more than they deserved," said Slavin, and he stood up, looking like a judge and talking like a judge, and narrated the incidents of the preceding hour.

"Now then, Mr. Adair," added Slavin, "these fellows brag of having a friend in that old miser, Gasper Farrington. I tell you that I happen to know that he has tried all kinds of ways to scare and bribe my friend here, Fairbanks, away from Stanley Junction. I suppose he's rich, and so tricky you can't connect him with their doings, but you can cage these fellows safely, and I want you to do it."

"The railroad company will certainly insist that Slump's bond be raised from five hundred dollars," spoke Adair. "You told me that Bemis very nearly wrecked a train by magnetizing the levers at the depot switch tower. Can you prove it?"

"I can," nodded Slavin emphatically.

"Very good. To-night's business there is no question about. It's a case of murderous assault and attempted mayhem. I shall see the prosecuting attorney at once, and demand that each of these prisoners be held in heavy bonds."

"I think that will hold them," said Slavin, in a tone of satisfaction. "I've got a charge against them, myself. They robbed me of two silver medals."

"We will take them at once before a magistrate," said Adair. "You'll have to

subscribe to the warrants, Slavin. You, too, Fairbanks."

Ralph simply bowed acquiescence. Slavin had taken the matter out of his hands. It was better so, Ralph readily realized. He did not believe that Farrington would go on their bonds for any large amount. This might lead to a rupture, and the prisoners might be induced to implicate the magnate, and tell what had become of Mrs. Davis.

"Come on, you!" spoke Slavin, roughly pulling his prisoners to their feet.

"You look out!" snarled Mort Bemis savagely. "See here, Mr. Officer, this fellow talks big, but he himself tied up a set of levers at the switch tower."

Slavin turned red. He looked at Ralph in a shamefaced way. Then he said bluntly:

"Yes, I did, Mr. Adair. That skunk got me to. It was before I knew Fairbanks--before I knew better. I give myself in charge for the act. I'm willing to suffer for it."

"Nonsense!" cried Ralph quickly.

"Do you make the complaint?" asked Adair.

"No, sir!" spoke Ralph emphatically.

"Nor would you appear against him?"

"Hardly!"

"You had better keep your mind on your own business then, Mr. Bemis," advised Adair.

"I call that a good night's work," said Slavin to Ralph, one hour later.

Mr. Adair had legally presented his evidence and the prisoners to a new magistrate.

Ike Slump and Mort Bemis were remanded to the town jail in default of bail in the sum of ten thousand dollars each.

"Now," observed Ralph, as he parted with the strange, forceful companion who had proven so good a friend to him--"now to wait and see what Gasper Farrington will do next."

CHAPTER XXIII--IKE SLUMP & CO.

"That fellow has got his nerve with him all right!" spoke old Jack Knight.

"I can't make out his idea," observed Ralph Fairbanks.

It was two days after the arrest of Ike Slump and Mort Bemis. Knight and his junior leverman were engrossed in watching a little interesting by-play going on in the vicinity of the in freight tracks.

A boy about Ralph's age and height had jumped into an open box car. He came out with a head of cabbage.

He did not run away, but stood stock-still on the near tracks, as if dallying with detection and arrest.

Some teamsters near by saw the act, but they only laughed carelessly.

The boy dropped the cabbage, climbed into another car, and came out this time with a small sack of potatoes. This he swung across his shoulders, and started towards the depot.

"The chump!" commented Knight. "Does he want to get caught purposely? Look at that, now: coast clear to the street, and walking deliberately into the jaws of justice!"

"He's caught, yes," said Ralph.

A day watchman had come rushing up to the boy. The latter neither stopped nor ran. He kept on his way steadily. He halted only when the watchman banged his cane down on the bag on his back. Then he dropped it.

The watchman grabbed the culprit's arm. The watchers in the switch tower could observe him excitedly waving his cane. He seemed to be trying to make his prisoner realize the enormity of his offense.

The latter, however, was unconcerned. He walked quietly along with the watchman towards the depot, making no effort to escape.

"A mighty queer sort of a thief, that," remarked Knight.

"Yes," said Ralph--"oh, my!"

Ralph gave a quick start. He leaned far through the open sash, and stared fixedly at prisoner and watchman as they passed the switch tower in his direct range of vision.

The young leverman was greatly perturbed. A call to the 'phone had distracted Knight's attention. As the watchman and his prisoner disappeared in the direction of the depot, Ralph's face grew to a void of wonder, doubt, and anxiety.

"It was Van Sherwin!" he breathed excitedly--"Van Sherwin, surely. Van a thief? Oh, there is some mistake!"

Ralph was greatly worked up. There was nothing in the rough attire and smirched face of the prisoner to recall the neatly-dressed Van whom Ralph had last seen. Yet as the prisoner had passed the tower, a gesture, the bearing of the latter, a familiar feature had enlightened Ralph unmistakably.

"Mr. Knight," he said quickly, "can I have ten minutes off?"

"Sure thing. What's up, Fairbanks?--you look disturbed," spoke Knight curiously.

"I--I want to run up to the depot to ask about a friend," explained Ralph, rather lamely.

He slipped on a coat and was down the ladder in a jiffy. Once out of the tower, he ran across the tracks in the direction of the depot.

Passing a switch shanty, a figure stepped from its side directly in his path. A challenging voice said quickly:

"Hold on, there, Ralph Fairbanks."

"Oh, you, Slavin?" said Ralph. "Don't delay me. I am in a hurry."

"I see you are. No need," proclaimed Slavin coolly, seizing and detaining Ralph's arm. "You're trying to overtake a friend, aren't you?"

"Why, how do you know that?" exclaimed Ralph in surprise.

"Name, Van--Van Sherman. No, Sherwin--that's it. Am I right?"

"Why, yes," admitted Ralph in a tone of wonderment, "but how you come to know----"

"I do know, don't I?" projected Slavin, with a shrewd smile. "This way for a minute, please."

He led Ralph out of range of the switch shanty. Then, buttonholing him persuasively, he said:

"Fairbanks, I know a good deal more about your affairs to-day than I did yesterday. Mightily glad I am of it. You'd ought to be, too. It's this way: I ran across that friend of yours last night."

"You mean Van Sherwin?"

"That's just what I do mean," responded Slavin. "It was queer, but I was nosing around the jail for some point on those fellows Slump and Bemis. I was very anxious to find out how they would act regarding old Farrington. It appears

they sent messages to him. I know that much. But he didn't show up. I noticed a stranger hanging around, just as I was doing. His actions aroused my suspicions. Well, it led to our getting acquainted, cautiously. You know how such things go. Soon we understood each other, perfectly. I was on the trail of Slump and Bemis to head off any funny work on the part of their friend, Farrington. Sherwin was trying to get a line on the whole case."

"He told you----" began Ralph.

"All I'd ought to know. Enough to show me that those fellows and Farrington are up to a very deep game. It all affects your interests. That was enough for me. There's a woman missing, isn't there? And some bonds? Those prisoners know where the woman is. The woman probably knows where the bonds are. All that is straight and simple. We took some time, this famous friend of yours, Van Sherwin, and I, deciding which thought the most of you----"

"Thank you, Slavin," said Ralph warmly.

"Then we concluded that you had enough real work to bother with, and decided to help you out on this case. The question was: how could we get in touch with Ike Slump & Co.? Your sharp-witted friend decided that. He's chain lightning, I tell you, and no mistake. He saw only one way. He acted on it. I reckon you saw how: he got arrested."

"As a thief!" exclaimed Ralph anxiously.

"Oh, don't let that worry you," and Slavin smiled coolly. "It was all arranged and understood by Bob Adair. Sherwin will go to jail all right. But Adair has fixed it so the minute he finds out what he is after and gives the word, Van Sherwin will have his liberty."

Ralph reflected seriously. He could find no fault with the unselfish ardor of his friends, that was sure. Their plan was a drastic one, but Van was smart, and probably knew what he was about.

"So," remarked Slavin, "you just get back to your work. Don't spoil our plans by interfering or trying to see Sherwin. Until I get that railroad job I'm promised I have nothing special to do. I'll put in the time in your service, see?"

"But," said Ralph, "Ike Slump knows Van."

"Does he? Very slightly, Sherwin says. And by the way, you didn't see Sherwin--close at hand?"

Ralph shook his head negatively.

"Only a special friend like you would be likely to recognize him, Sherwin says. He's fairly well disguised himself. Besides, he simply wants to get where he can watch and overhear Slump & Co. He won't try to chum with them."

Ralph went back to the switch tower more easy in his mind. He felt pretty tender towards his two loyal boy friends. Knowing Ike Slump's crude, blurting ways, he believed that if Farrington got balky, Ike would make some break that

would be of advantage to Van.

He decided to tell his mother of this new phase in the case. Something startling, however, interrupted.

He had got ready for supper, and was entering the cozy little dining room, when Mrs. Fairbanks, at the window, called out suddenly:

"Come here, quick, Ralph."

"What is it, mother?" he asked.

"I fancied I heard some sounds like an explosion--and shouts," said Mrs. Fairbanks. "There is a great glare over to the south. Look, Ralph."

She held aside the curtain so he could see.

"Why," cried Ralph, "it is a fire--a big fire, somewhere!"

"Farrington's old factory," said Mrs. Fairbanks.

CHAPTER XXIV--FIRE!

A great red glare covered the whole southern sky as Ralph reached the outer air.

"Mother is right, I guess," he spoke quickly--"it is certainly in the direction of the old factory."

The spur switch to the factory had been completed for some days. Ralph had that afternoon operated the levers opening the Farrington extension for the first time.

The new lessee of the factory, he understood, was going to use oil for fuel under some of the boilers. Among the twenty-odd cars switched off on the spur that afternoon Ralph had noticed as many as ten tank cars.

As Ralph ran on, he was surprised to note the extent of the glare. It spread from a point quite remote from the factory right up to the factory location.

He heard shouts in the distance, and scattered figures were thronging the landscape from all directions.

Ralph passed a short timber reach. A vivid panorama now spread out before him.

A thousand yards ahead was the ravine. This the factory switch spur traversed.

Shooting up from the depths of the ravine for nearly a quarter of a mile were leaping, vivid tongues of flame.

Getting where he could command a view townwards obliquely across the ravine, Ralph realized just what had happened.

Outlined against the black sky there showed the framework of several freight cars. They were simply threads of flame now.

In some way the stationary freights had caught fire. The blaze had communicated to an oil tank. There had been an explosion, scattering the burning oil far and wide.

The cars had been blocked on an incline. Apparently the force of an explosion, or the fire, had dislodged or destroyed the blocking plank. Some of the cars had broken free. Scudding down the ravine, they had lodged cinders and flame in all directions.

Coming to a curve, they had jumped the track. About two hundred feet from the factory they had gone down into a gravel pit, piling on top of each other.

The dry grass and shrubbery were on fire on both sides of the ravine for a full quarter of a mile back towards the town. The house Mrs. Davis had lived in was ablaze from cellar to garret.

Suddenly there was an awful roar. It was fortunate that Ralph was no nearer to the center of the explosion than he was.

The tanks that had crashed down into the gravel pit had formed a seething caldron of fire, and had now exploded.

So powerful was the concussion that Ralph was thrown flat. Getting erect again promptly, he saw a great flare of fire leap a hundred feet in the air.

This bore with it blazing planks, fragments of red-hot iron, and dazzling cinders.

They fell all over the landscape. They particularly enveloped the old factory. This, Ralph noticed, took fire instantly in a dozen different places.

"Hello, Fairbanks!" cried a breathless passerby.

"Slavin?" said Ralph.

"Yes, keep on. There's hose and apparatus up at the factory. That's all there is worth saving, now."

"It will never be saved," pronounced Ralph convincedly, but he joined Slavin on a run forward.

They were compelled to make a wide detour here and there of the ravine windings. Even great trees lining it had caught fire. The smoke was dense, and the burning cinders rained down upon them like hail.

"Hold on," ordered Ralph suddenly, but Slavin, catching sight of men and ladders in the vicinity of the factory, dashed on for the main center of excitement and activity.

Ralph had halted. He stood within about a hundred feet of the old house between Mrs. Davis' former home and the factory.

It was across this stretch, belonging to an old invalid widow, that Farrington had forced his right of way. The roof of the house was ablaze, So was one side of the building. Ralph had been checked by a wailing cry.

"Some one shut in there," he decided. "Even if it is only an animal, I must find out, and try to rescue it."

Ralph ran through the open rear doorway. A hall extended the length of the house. The outside blaze shone brightly into a side room, although it was filled with smoke pouring through a sash half burned away.

An old woman in a wheel chair blocked the doorway of the front room. Apparently this was her only means of getting about. She had tried to escape, the chair, had got wedged in the doorway, and she was moaning and crying for help.

"Is that you, David?" she gasped wildly, as her smoke-blurred eyes made out Ralph.

"No, but I am here to help you," answered Ralph in a cheery, encouraging voice. "Don't worry, ma'am."

Ralph soon extricated the chair. As he ran it and its occupant out into the open air, the front windows blew in from the intense heat, and the flames swept through the house.

Ralph ran the chair to a high point of safety.

"Don't go any further," panted the old woman. "My son David is due home. He will be worried to death. I want to be where I can see and call to him, when he comes."

"Very well," said Ralph, "you are safe here, at least for the present. I will run back and save what I can in the house."

"No, no," demurred the old woman quickly. "There is nothing worth saving. The furniture is old and insured. So is the house. Oh, I am so thankful to you!" she cried fervently.

"That is all right," said Ralph. "I am sorry to see you homeless."

"How did the fire come?" questioned the woman. "From Gasper Farrington's new railroad?"

"Yes," said Ralph, "some oil cars on the switch spur took fire, and exploded."

"Then he is responsible!" cried the woman eagerly. "And his factory is burning up, isn't it? It's a retribution on him, that's what it is," she declared hoarsely. "He ran his tracks over our land without permission. He spoiled our peaceful home. Won't I get damages from him, as well as my insurance money?"

"I think your chances are very good," answered Ralph.

The old woman looked somewhat comforted. She sat mumbling to herself. Ralph wished to hurry over to the factory. He offered to wheel her to a shelter

nearer the town, but she insisted she must wait in sight of the house until her son arrived.

Ralph did not like to leave her alone. The grass might catch fire and the flames spread, even to the place where they were now. He stood surveying the fire interestedly, when his companion uttered a sudden scream.

"Oh, my! oh, my!" she wailed, wringing her hands. "How could I forget!"

Ralph pressed closer to her side.

"Is something distressing you?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, yes! yes!" said the woman. "Is the house all on fire? No, there may be time yet. Boy, will you--will you do something for me?"

"Surely, if I can."

"In the house--something I must save."

"What is it? In what part of the house?"

"Not mine. It is a sacred trust. It is something I promised faithfully to look after. Oh, dear! dear! if it should be burned up!"

"Try and be calm, and tell me about it," advised Ralph.

"It is upstairs--in the rear garret room."

Ralph looked up rather hopelessly at the little window fully twenty feet from the ground.

"How do the stairs run?" he asked.

"Only from the front. You can't go that way, though," panted the woman. "It's all ablaze. But there is a ladder."

"Where--quick."

"Behind that old grape trellis."

"How long is it?" asked Ralph.

"It reaches the roof. My son used it in shingling. Take a hatchet or a club with you. The window is nailed down on the inside, very tightly. You will have to smash the window in. Is it too late?"

"Not at all," declared Ralph briskly.

"The roof is all on fire!"

"Never mind that, only be quick and tell me: what is it you want me to get?"

"There's only one thing in the room. An old trunk."

"An old trunk?" repeated Ralph rapidly.

"It's all tied up with rope. Smash it open, too. Inside is a tin case, a small flat tin case. That's what I want. Oh! you will get it, won't you?" pleaded the old woman, in a fever of suspense and excitement.

"I shall certainly try," declared Ralph.

"Don't risk your precious life by any delay, dear, dear boy!" cried the old woman hysterically. "I believe I should die of worry if that box was burned up. I promised so sincerely to take care of it. What would Mrs. Davis say if it was

lost!"

"Who?" cried Ralph sharply, with a great start.

"Mrs. Davis."

"The woman who lived next door?"

"Yes, yes. She left it with me, about a month ago. She was afraid to keep it with herself. I promised----"

But Ralph was listening no longer. A great conviction filled his mind that at this critical moment, amid fire and peril, a crisis in his life faced him.

CHAPTER XXV--THE LITTLE TIN BOX

Ralph ran towards the grape trellis. He soon found the ladder the old woman had mentioned.

It was long and quite heavy, but seizing one end he dragged it towards the burning building. Soon he had it set in place and balanced. He had guessed at the proper slant correctly. Its top just rested on the edge of the attic window outside the sill.

"No time to lose," declared Ralph. "Where will I find a hatchet?" he called to the old woman.

"In the wood shed--right near the door, on a chopping block," she directed, watching his every movement in a fever of suspense.

Ralph darted into the wood shed. He came out, hatchet in hand, and sprang instantly onto the ladder.

The building was doomed, he saw that. Its entire front half was in flame. As he got a few feet from the ground a great whirlwind of smoke and sparks enveloped him.

"Why," exclaimed Ralph, as he reached the top of the ladder, "the window is all right."

He did not need to use the hatchet. Contrary to the old woman's positive statement, Ralph found the sash raised an inch or two. It pushed up smoothly.

He felt obtruding nails on the inside, which appeared to have been forced out of place.

Climbing through the window, Ralph was nearly choked with the dense smoke filling the room. The window vent somewhat cleared the air, but he could not see an inch before his face.

"I can't stand much of this," he reflected, and then held his breath closely.

Ralph had to grope with hands and feet. He lined one side wall of the apartment, ran to the window for a supply of fresh air, and resumed his difficult quest.

"No luck so far," he panted. "The room seems entirely empty. There is not even a carpet on the floor."

Suddenly, a cracking sound and then a slight crash warned him to look out for danger.

A door leading into the front attic just then burned free of its hinges. It fell inside the apartment Ralph was in.

Its vivid blazing lit up the room somewhat.

"I see it--the trunk!" said Ralph, and sprang to a corner where a box-like outline showed.

Again the old woman's statements were at fault. The trunk was perfectly easy of access, and Ralph did not have to use the hatchet at all.

Ropes that at one time possibly enclosed the trunk lay at one side, cut in two. The broken lock of the trunk lay on the floor. Ralph threw up the cover.

Inside was a mass of cotton batting. He threw this out on the floor. Then some old newspapers followed. Beneath these lay a little flat tin box.

"I have it," said Ralph with satisfaction, grasping the object of the old woman's anxiety.

It was high time to make an exit. Some sparks fell on the cotton. It blazed up into his face and singed his hair. Ralph found himself nearly overcome by the smoke. He fairly staggered to the window, and spluttering and scorched, almost slid the length of the ladder.

Reaching the ground the young leverman stood stationary for a moment. He dug the cinders out of his eyes, and took a good long refreshing breath of the pure air.

A call roused him to new action. The old woman was shouting at him and waving her hand eagerly.

She was not alone now. A pale-faced young man of about thirty stood by her side. Ralph presumed that this was her son, David, to whom she had so frequently referred.

"Did you get it--did you get it?" she called out anxiously, as Ralph ran up to the invalid chair.

"Yes, ma'am," responded Ralph, handing over the box.

"Oh, dear! Oh, how shall I ever thank you? David, he is a brave, noble boy!" and hugging the box to her breast, the old woman wept hysterically.

"You saved my mother's life," spoke the young man, placing a hand that trembled on Ralph's shoulder.

"I am glad if that is so," said Ralph.

"David! David! David!"

Just here the old woman interrupted with startling suddenness. Ralph turned quickly toward her in amazement. Her son ran to her side, very much alarmed. She had shouted out his name in such a lost, despairing tone that both her auditors were thrilled.

"Mother--what is it?" cried the young man.

The old woman waved the tin box that Ralph had just given her.

"It was tied with twine--in a sheet of writing paper, and sealed," she said. "And look now, David--it is empty!"

"Was there something in it?" questioned Ralph, his spirits sinking to zero.

All along he had entertained some hopeful ideas regarding that little tin box, knowing that it had been the property of the mysterious Mrs. Davis.

"Why, surely," said the old woman, weeping bitterly and wringing her hands. "Mrs. Davis put some folded papers in it. I saw her do it. She said they were very valuable. She was afraid she would lose them, or be robbed. She said she feared wicked enemies."

"When was that?" asked Ralph.

"About a month ago. She wrapped up, tied, and sealed the box. She asked me where she could hide it for a time. I told her about the old trunk. It was empty, except for some cotton and newspapers. I told her to nail down the window, put the box in the trunk, tie up the trunk, and lock the attic door. She did all that. She made me promise solemnly to think first of that box if anything happened. And now someone has stolen the papers! I have been faithless to my trust! Poor Mrs. Davis said her very life depended on those papers. Oh, David! David! I shall die of shame and grief, I know I shall!"

"You did your best, you couldn't help it," said her son soothingly.

"No, some thief has visited your attic," declared Ralph.

"But no one except Mrs. Davis and myself knew that the box was there," suggested the weeping woman.

"Someone surely found out," said Ralph. "I found the window forced up and the trunk lock broken."

"Mother, you really must not take on so," spoke the young man in a worried tone. "You are shaking all over. I must get you to some shelter."

CHAPTER XXVI--A CLEW!

The young switch-tower man had lost all interest in the fire now. He stood thinking deeply, and felt quite depressed.

He was very certain that the papers Mrs. Davis had placed in the tin box in some way referred to her interest in the twenty thousand dollars' worth of railroad bonds, to which she had so frequently and significantly alluded.

She had told his mother that she was going to get something from a friend to show her and Ralph. Was it not these very same papers?

It was very possible, Ralph reflected further, that in some way Mrs. Davis' kidnappers had got a clew to the hiding place of these self-same documents.

"One word, please," spoke up Ralph, as the young man started to wheel his mother away from the scene of the fire. "Someone certainly forced a way to your attic and rifled that trunk."

"Who could it be--how could they know?" queried the distressed invalid.

"Have you had any strange visitors?" inquired Ralph.

"No--no one hardly ever comes here, except neighbors. Of course there have been a lot of workmen building the switch. But they were harmless, ignorant persons. Got a drink at the well, and went about their business."

"You have noticed no suspicious characters hanging about?" pressed Ralph.

"Oh, no."

"By the way, mother," interposed the young man, "you forgot about the two young fellows who came here day before yesterday--no, the day before that--Tuesday."

"Oh, they were the insurance men."

"What insurance men?" asked Ralph.

"They said they were inspectors. They said they were hired by the insurance companies to look over risks. They asked me if we had any gasoline. I said no. Then they asked if I had any inflammable stuff stored in the attic. They wanted to go up and see, but I told them the attic was empty."

"They wanted to inspect the attic, did they?" murmured Ralph thoughtfully.

"Yes. Then they said they would have to look over the chimneys and roof, to be sure everything was all right."

"Did they do so?"

"I told them where the ladder was. Of course, confined helpless to my invalid chair, I couldn't go out with them. They came back inside in about ten minutes, and said they had found everything in shipshape order."

"Those are the persons who robbed the trunk," declared Ralph in a tone of conviction.

"Do you think so?" cried the old woman. "Do you know them?"

"I don't know--yet. Do you remember how they were dressed?"

"They were well-dressed, I remember that."

"Young men, I believe you said?"

"Yes, boys, almost--a little older than you. One wore a pearl-gray derby hat. The other wore a kind of automobile cap."

"Thank you," said Ralph, showing the value of this information in manner and face.

"Do you know them?" inquired the old woman eagerly.

"I think I do," said Ralph.

"Can you find them?"

"They will not be hard to locate," answered Ralph definitely. "Do not worry, ma'am. You have given me a very clever clew as to the robbers. I think I know who has got the papers that were in that little tin box."

"Oh, be sure to let me know if you get back those papers, won't you?" pressed the old woman anxiously.

"I certainly shall," promised Ralph.

He bade mother and son good-bye. Then Ralph proceeded in the direction of the old Farrington factory.

Great crowds lined the ravine and surrounded the site of the factory. This had been burned to the ground. The ravine in places was still a nest of fire, but the flames were confined there. The fires in the grass and in the shrubbery had been beaten out.

Ralph passed from crowd to crowd, gleaning many a bit of exciting gossip.

He heard a local insurance agent say that the fire had done damage to the extent of a hundred thousand dollars. The factory represented the bulk of the loss.

"And no insurance, did you say?" someone asked the agent.

"Not on the building. The insurance expired there only last week."

Ralph finally found the person he was in search of--Slavin. He had made up his mind that something must be done promptly in regard to the documents stolen from Mrs. Davis' tin box.

Ike Slump and Mort Bemis tallied precisely to the old woman's description

of her "insurance inspectors" visitors.

Their call at the old house had evidently been made on the afternoon of the day when Slump and Bemis had decoyed Ralph to the Stiggs cottage.

Ralph reasoned that if they had got the documents in question, they had them now, for their arrest had followed within a few hours of their rifling of the trunk.

"I want you to do something for me, Slavin, if you will," said Ralph, leading his companion out of hearing of the crowd.

"All right," was the prompt response.

"Something urgent and important."

"Fire away--I'm yours truly."

"Can you get word for me to my friend, Van Sherwin?"

"Sure."

"To-night?"

"At any and all times. We arranged that with the road detective."

"Very well," said Ralph. "I want you to deliver a note to Van. It will take some time to write it, so you will have to come up to the house with me, and wait till I get it ready."

They proceeded forthwith in the direction of the Fairbanks homestead. Ralph invited his companion to stay to supper.

"Say," observed Slavin, as they had proceeded on their way some distance and he took a last backward glance at the dying flames--"say, Ralph Fairbanks, I wonder if it looks to you--that fire I mean--like it does to me?"

"How do you mean, Slavin?" questioned Ralph.

"That some of old Gasper Farrington's chickens are coming home to roost!"

CHAPTER XXVII--SLAVIN GETS A JOB

"Good-morning, Mr. Fairbanks."

"Why, good-morning, Mr. Slavin, but--quite formal, aren't you?" said Ralph with a smile.

It was the second day after the factory fire. Ralph and Knight, both busy at their duties, had been visited by Slavin.

He came up the ladder and into the switch tower with a certain slow dignity of manner that made Ralph stare.

"Hello, Slav," nodded old Jack Knight carelessly.

"How do you do--sir?" answered Slavin with rigid courtesy as he sank to the armchair--always a welcome visitor, nowadays.

"Bust me!" whispered Knight with a keen glance at Slavin, and suppressing a quick snicker--"what's in his crop now, Fairbanks?"

Ralph wondered, too. He stole a second furtive look at Slavin. Then he had to turn his head aside to hide a smile.

Slavin sat like a statue. The one impelling motive of his life at present, it seemed, was to suggest the idea that he had weighty matters on his mind.

He looked like a being struggling with the most momentous responsibilities. His eye ran over the long array of levers as if he had been officially delegated to inspect them. His bearing was--profound.

Ralph noticed a change in his general dress. So did Knight, and in a hoarse, undertoned guffaw he observed to his young assistant:

"The spell is on, and he's got himself up regardless!"

Knight could hardly hold himself in. The old veteran had seen every phase of railroad régime and railroad vanity in his long career. At a glance he had guessed what was up with Young Slavin.

Ralph noticed that Slavin wore a new head gear. It was a direct copy of the touring cap affected by the depot master.

The top button of Slavin's coat was a brass one. It was either a conductor's or a Pullman porter's official insignia--at a distance Ralph could not tell which.

Sticking out from one of Slavin's coat pockets was an assortment of folders. Ralph recognized them as including all the official time schedules of the Great Northern.

Besides that, in his hand Slavin carried a somber-looking, flexible-covered book. This suggested some technical engineering or scientific work.

Slavin consulted its pages as he sat in the armchair. Ralph and Knight scented fun in the air. They went on silently with their duties.

This grew irksome to Slavin. He finally arose to his feet, and began restively pacing about the switch tower.

"H'm," he observed at length. "Saw a great article on the combustion of coal gases in locomotives, last night."

"That so?" nodded Knight, and proceeded to whistle industriously.

Slavin looked hurt at the repulse. In a minute or two he blurted out again:

"I see there's a new invention for economizing steam in short-run engines.

Sort of studying up things, see? This here book----"

"What book is it, Slavin?" inquired Ralph pleasantly.

"Yes, what's this high jinks in railroad education you're firing at us?" demanded Knight, suddenly seizing the volume from Slavin's hand. "Oh, my! hold me! ha! ha!" roared the veteran towerman. "Listen, Fairbanks: 'Technical Topography of High Grade Elevations in Asiatic Railways.' Oh, me! Oh, my! Slavin, you take the cake!"

"Mr. Knight, I didn't come here to have my feelings trampled on," spoke Slavin in tones of offended dignity.

"Right, old son. You came here to show how hard you'd got the railroad fever--hey, you spoony? Why, it's sticking out all over you. I had it once. They all get it at first. Why, you ambitious young lunkhead," cried Knight, slapping Slavin's shoulder with a hearty whack that nearly knocked him over, "you're simply tickled to death about something, and I can tell it in three words."

"What is it, Mr. Knight?" asked Ralph innocently.

"'Got a job!'"

"Good!" cried Ralph, grasping Slavin's hand in congratulation. "Is it true?"

"Why, yes, it is," answered Slavin proudly. "So, what's the harm in trying to post up, hey?"

"My son," observed Knight in a patriarchal fashion, "posting up and looking railroady is all right, but there's many a long, tough reach in plain buttons, and a long distance away from combustion and high grades, before you even begin to guess what you know about practical railroading. Who did you see--the master mechanic?"

"No--depot master."

"What--not put on duty here with us?" exclaimed Ralph in a really pleased tone.

"That's it," announced Slavin grandly.

"Well, I am truly glad," said Ralph.

"So am I," put in Knight--"I'll catch your mistakes like a true friend, and help you along like a brother."

"I am not going to make any mistakes," declared Slavin confidently.

"Oho! aint?" said Knight softly.

"No, sir. I've watched you two closely. It's simple. You get 7. Pull 7. Muscle does it."

"That so?" continued old Jack, in a slow, pitying drawl. "Well, well! Now, just to demonstrate, suppose you take a test?"

"I'm your man!" cried Slavin, pulling off his coat and striking an attitude.

"Double switch," called out Knight--"18 and 19."

Slavin wavered, Knight had called out two levers way down the line, rarely

used. Slavin's eyes ran the long array. Then he got his bearings, and swung his arms down into the battery with a ponderous swoop.

His great strong fists clasped the lever handles in a really admirable manner, and he looked the prodigy of muscle he claimed to be.

"Open 'em up!" shouted Knight

Slavin bent to his task.

"Pull--you lubber, pull!" yelled old Jack Knight.

CHAPTER XXVIII--WHAT THE "EXTRA" TOLD

"They won't move!" cried Young Slavin disgustedly. "They don't budge. Oh, rot on you! guying a fellow," and he slunk back to the armchair in chagrin.

Old Jack laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. He had tricked his new apprentice into a "grand-stand" display at two levers that had been wedged tight shut and out of use for a month.

He rallied the would-be railroader for a few minutes. Then in his kind-spirited way he took up the matter seriously.

He told Slavin just what his initial duties would be: sweeping out the tower, keeping the fuel supply handy, oiling the lever and rod sockets, cleaning the windows.

Slavin was somewhat disappointed at this dreary routine. When, however, Knight recited his own early experience and what it led to in proficiency and promotion, Slavin became more resigned.

"It looks good," he said longingly. "The day I draw more than board and lodging wages and pull a lever, I'll give you two a banquet. Say, I can hardly wait to begin!"

"When do you begin, Slavin?" asked old Jack.

"Next Monday."

Slavin hung around the switch tower till Knight went away in answer to a 'phone call from the limits tower. Then he sidled up to Ralph.

"Been waiting to tell you," he said in a low tone.

"Something about Van?"

"Yes."

"Did you get any word from him?"

"This morning. Came to the rear jail window, where I wait for him. Said just one word."

"What was it?"

"To-night."

"That was all?"

"Someone inside interrupted him, I think, so that was all."

"'To-night,'" repeated Ralph musingly. "I wonder what he means?"

"Action to-night, of course. Something is going to happen. Last night--you remember what he told me?"

"Yes, Van said he felt sure that Slump and Bemis had the documents stolen from Mrs. Davis."

"That's it," nodded Slavin. "You know Slump wrote a sassy letter to old Farrington."

"So you told me."

"Farrington paid no attention to it. Then Van overheard these two precious schemers concocting a new note. It told old Farrington that they had something better than merely knowing where a certain woman was."

"They meant Mrs. Davis."

"Of course. In this last note they said that they had some very valuable papers belonging to Mrs. Davis. They threatened that if Farrington didn't get them out of that jail inside of forty-eight hours, they would send for Ralph Fairbanks and turn the papers over to him."

"This is getting interesting," remarked Ralph.

"And exciting. Oh, something is sure to drop, soon. That old miser will never go any twenty thousand dollars' bonds on those two scape-graces."

"It is not likely," said Ralph. "Do you think Farrington paid any attention to the second note?"

"I think he did."

"Why so?"

"As I left the jail, I saw his coachman come out of the building. He had an empty basket on his arm. I think he had been taking some food and such fixings to Ike Slump & Co."

"And the latest is Van's 'To-night'," mused Ralph. "Slavin, you will keep a close watch on things, won't you? I believe affairs are very near a crisis."

"I'll not miss anything," Slavin assured Ralph stanchly--"least of all you, when there's any important word to report."

Ralph was restless and expectant all that evening at home. He sat up till ten

o'clock, hoping that Slavin might bring him some word.

None came, however. He went to bed, and as usual left the house for the switch tower at 7.30 in the morning.

Just as Ralph neared the depot yards, a small boy with a bundle of papers under his arm darted down the street.

Ralph remembered that this was "paper day." He paused and listened as the lad shouted out his wares.

"Extry! extry!" he called.

"Here, boy--what have you got extra?" asked a passer-by.

"Full account of the great Stanley Junction jail escape!"

"What's that?" cried Ralph irrepressibly.

"Hey, never mind--I'll tell you," pronounced Slavin's voice suddenly at his elbow. "I'm out of breath. Just missed you at your house, and ran all the way here after you."

"Slavin, what is this I hear--a jail escape?"

"Yes--Slump and Bemis. It seems someone smuggled some tools in to them yesterday."

"Farrington's man."

"That's how I figure it out," assented Slavin. "Anyhow, they discovered that the prisoners were gone about midnight. I didn't hear of it until about an hour ago. I hurried to the road detective. He got a 'phone from Van Sherwin at the jail about two o'clock this morning. It was to wire to the jailer to give him his liberty."

"What--Van gone, too!" exclaimed Ralph.

"That's the way it looks. I just came from the jail. They had let Sherwin go. The jailer said he had left a note. For Ralph Fairbanks. I took it to deliver. Here it is."

Ralph eagerly tore open the letter Slavin handed him.

It contained Van's signature in initials, and one line only. This read:

"Got track of Mrs. Davis--I have the stolen papers."

CHAPTER XXIX--GUESSING

Young Slavin was marking some initials on the current date on a big calendar hanging up on the door of the coat closet of the depot switch tower.

It was his third day of service. As old Jack Knight came up the trap ladder, his grim face broke into an expression of sincere approbation. He took a keen look around the place.

"Neat and tidy," he observed. "You'll do, Slavin. But what's those hieroglyphics on that calendar for?"

"Oh, just a memoranda," explained the new tower hand, with a conscious flush.

"'P.I.N.' eh?" said Knight.

The initials were blue-penciled in the date space of each of the three days of Slavin's employment.

"Yes, sir."

"What's the answer? Something about a coupling pin?"

"Naw. Those initials, Mr. Knight, represent the boiling down of the rules for employees printed on the card of instructions."

"That so?"

"Yes, sir, Promptness, Industry, Neatness. I'm trying to fill that bill."

"You've done it so far," observed old Jack. "I hear you show up an hour before time."

"Can't sleep, thinking of my grand luck!" chuckled Slavin.

"You're certainly all the time fussing around, if that's industry," went on Knight. "Those windows shine like headlights. You've oiled up everything till the lack of creaking makes a fellow lonesome. As to neatness--well, if you haven't actually scrubbed the floor here!"

"I thought it needed it," said Slavin.

"Keep it up, son," encouraged old Jack. "You're making a fine beginning."

Slavin went singing and whistling about his work the whole day long. It did Ralph's heart good, when he arrived, to see his protégé happy, industrious, and headed in the right direction.

Things were going on famously smooth and satisfactory at the switch tower. A friend of old Farrington's, and by no means of Ralph's, one Bardon, an inspector, had looked over the layout with a critical eye the day previous.

"You'll find no flaws here, friend," old Jack had announced.

Bardon had to admit that the switch tower régime was in perfect working order.

Since the escape of Ike Slump and Mort Bemis and the new disappearance of Van Sherwin, not a clew as to the course or whereabouts of the missing trio had reached either Ralph or his friends.

There had been a big row up at the jail, and one of the under officers had been discharged under suspicion.

It was evident that someone had smuggled tools and ropes into the jail, for these were found in the cell through the forced window of which Slump and Bemis had escaped.

These could hardly have passed proper inspection, if hidden in food or clothing brought to the prisoners by outsiders.

"Of course old Farrington's man did the job," asserted Slavin.

"Of course he did," assented Ralph. "It was the cheapest way of giving his troublesome pensioners their liberty."

Van's message to Ralph had a very encouraging tone to it. He evidently had a clew to Mrs. Davis' place of confinement, and "he had the stolen documents."

As the days went by, however, Ralph began to grow anxious, and his mother shared his worry. Ralph had told her everything concerning the rifled tin box. Mrs. Fairbanks was mainly troubled over the possible imprisonment and mistreatment of Mrs. Davis.

"The poor lady has suffered a great deal of trouble," she remarked. "Her mind was none too strong. It is wicked to torture her further, Ralph, can we do nothing to force Mr. Farrington to tell where she is?"

"He would deny having ever heard of Mrs. Davis," asserted Ralph convincedly. "Of course, if any mishap or failure comes to Van, and he doesn't report soon, I will see a lawyer and try and compel Farrington to some action. He is a shrewd, cruel man, though, mother. I am afraid our only hope is in Van, or the recapture of Slump and Bemis."

"Have they tried to find them?"

"Mr. Adair has been searching for them everywhere. He believes that Farrington assisted in their escape, and gave them a large amount of money to leave the country."

Gasper Farrington was not having a very happy time of it. Ralph decided this that morning, as he noticed the magnate pass on the other side of the street.

Farrington looked bent, old, and troubled. He had sustained a total loss at

the factory fire. His tricky methods were becoming known to the public. He was losing the respect of people. This he realized, and showed it both in bearing and face.

Ralph was thinking about all this about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the depot master's messenger came up the tower ladder. He had a pocketful of mail.

"Postal card for you, Fairbanks," he said.

Ralph took the card and went to the window to inspect it. The postal was blurred over and wrinkled, back and front. It looked as if it had been posted after being wetted by snow or rain, or in some stage of its transmission had fallen into a mess of wet dirt.

Its address was clear enough. It bore a railway mail postmark. On its reverse side the letters had run with the moisture.

"From Van," said Ralph, setting himself the difficult task of deciphering the blurred lines. "I know his handwriting, and it is signed 'V.' It was written in a hurry, that looks certain. What has he to say?"

Ralph conned the imperfect message over and over. After many interruptions, at the end of fully half an hour's careful study, these were the only coherent words he could formulate from the blurred scrawl:

"----hurry--and important. Don't miss telling--Slump--Bemis--Wednesday evening--safe--bank shipment--express--found out, and special freight--sure to be there--not later--near South Dover--don't delay a minute--will soon--back at Stanley Junction."

"What is he trying to tell me?" murmured Ralph in a puzzled and anxious way, after a third and fourth reading of the perplexing message.

He finally gave up guessing what the missing links in the postal screed might be.

"One thing is certain," reflected Ralph. "Wednesday evening something is on the books. The only other definite clew is South Dover. Does he mean for me to meet him there? Does he mean that Slump and Bemis are in that neighborhood? There is something about a bank shipment, express, and special freight. That means the railroad is somehow interested. 'Don't miss,' he writes, 'don't delay.' I won't," resolved Ralph keenly. "I wouldn't dare to, with such a word from Van. He has kept mum all along. Now that he does speak out, it certainly means something important."

Ralph thought things over for another half-hour, and then made up his mind what he would do.

He consulted the train schedules. Then he explained to Knight the necessity for a brief absence from duty. Without seeing Slavin, who had been sent for some report blanks to the depot, Ralph hurried home.

He told his mother about the postal card, dressed for the trip down the road, and caught the 4.30 train. Ralph was cordially invited to a seat in the cab by his loyal old friend, Engineer Griscom.

It was nearly dusk when the train reached South Dover. The place was only a name. There was not a building within a mile of the tool sheds and water tank that marked the spot.

The train slowed up for Ralph, who jumped off. He waved his hand to Griscom in adieu, and looked all about him.

South Dover was a switching and make-up point for the accommodation of Dover freight transfers. It had a dozen sidings and spurs. Freight coming into Dover on a north destination was switched here, and made ready to be taken up by through trains.

A man on a track bicycle had just set some lights. He whirled away towards Dover as Ralph stood looking about him.

No other human being was in sight. On a near siding stood half a dozen freight cars. Over on another track, near the water tower, stood a dead freight dummy.

"I can't make out much here," reflected Ralph. "No one in sight, no indication why Van mentioned the place."

He strolled over to the dead locomotive. Its tender was full of coal. Ralph opened the furnace door. Everything was ready to kindle up, and the gauge showed a full water supply.

"I see," mused Ralph. "There is to be some switching, or a night run. I don't know how soon, though. Well, I'll hang around a bit. Something may develop."

Ralph walked down the short line of freights, casually inspecting the cars. As he came to the last one he dodged back in a very lively fashion.

Climbing up the embankment to the left were four persons. They had just emerged, it seemed, from thick underbrush lining the tracks.

Two of them were grown men--bearded, rough-looking fellows, resembling tramps.

The other two persons of the group had a prompt and distinct interest to Ralph. He at once recognized Ike Slump and Mort Bemis.

They were coming directly towards the freights. Ralph saw the danger of discovery.

The door of the car next to the last box freight was ajar.

Ralph leaped up into the car just as Ike Slump reached the top of the railroad embankment.

CHAPTER XXX--PRECIOUS FREIGHT

"Here we are!" almost immediately sounded out the tones of Mort Bemis.

"Glad of it," growled a gruff, breathless voice, unfamiliar to the listening Ralph. "We are about done out lugging these heavy crowbars over swamps and up this steep climb."

"Quick action, now," broke in Slump. "Here, give me a crowbar."

Ralph glided to the end of the box car he was in. He got near its little rear grated window.

Cautiously he looked out. Standing at the side of the track were Bemis and the two tramps. One of them held a crowbar. Another like it Ike was extending between the bumpers. He knocked up the coupling pin connecting the rear car with the rest of the train.

Then he pried against the head of the pin, and forced it out. As it fell to the roadbed, he said:

"Watch up and down the tracks, Mort."

"Oh, there's no likelihood of anybody coming for three hours," retorted Bemis. "The express has passed, and the signal man. The switching crew will keep snug and cozy in Hank Allen's restaurant up at Dover till schedule time, and that isn't till nine o'clock."

"Well, keep a sharp lookout, all the same," directed Ike. "I worked up this deal, and I reckon I have a right to boss the job. Come, my friend," to the tramp holding the other crowbar. "Pry on that left wheel. I'll take the right. Soon as we get momentum, you two give us a shoulder. Push, till I say let go. Understand?"

Ralph was momentarily bewildered. The quartette were about to separate the last car from the train. Why?

Ike and his helper got their crowbars each under a wheel. They budged the car, and got it fairly started. Then they yelled to the other two, and, dropping the crowbars, joined them in pushing the car along by sheer shoulder strength.

Ralph stared after them in doubt and concern. Then as they took a switch with rusted rails, he clearly saw their object.

The wheels of the detached freight car, striking a sharp slant, ran away from the persons who had started it up.

They stood still, gazing after the runaway. It moved on with sharpening speed, took a curve, and was shut out from view.

For fully two minutes afterwards, however, Ralph could catch the diminishing clatter of the fast revolving wheels. The others stood listening, too.

It was fairly dusk now. As the quartette approached the remaining cars, Ralph noticed that Mort Bemis was chuckling. Ike Slump's face wore an expression of intense satisfaction. They all halted as they reached the stationary freights.

"Here," spoke Ike, "we don't need those any longer."

He seized the crowbars in turn lying on the roadbed. He gave them a swing, sending them in among the long grass at the side of the embankment.

"Done quite neatly," spoke Bemis. "Now then, fellows--back the way we came. Horse and wagon all ready?"

"Yes," assented one of the tramps.

"Make it lively, then. We can get around to the switch off where that car has come to a stop, in about an hour."

"Then for the safe, and a fortune apiece!" cried Ike excitedly. "Say, Mort, the five hundred we lost on the races looks a fleabite to what we'll divide up in the next two hours!"

"I don't see why you didn't drive right up here and dump the safe?" suggested one of the men of the party.

"Don't you?" spoke Ike. "Well, you'd have a fine time, driving over, that boggy waste, wouldn't you? Besides, that spur is never used. No chance of any meddlers where that car is now. The train crew won't be here till nine o'clock. When they do come, even if they miss the car, they won't suspect where it has gone to."

"Correct," assented Mort Bemis in a jubilant tone. "Oh, we're working on greased rollers! Come, let's go around for the horse and wagon, and get that safe in our claws."

The quartette descended the embankment and disappeared from view. Ralph jumped from the car the moment they were out of sight.

In the light of the overheard conversation and recent doings of Slump and his companions, the young leverman was pretty well able to conjecture what they were doing.

Van's blurred message grew clearer now. Ralph doubted not but that Slump and Bemis had projected and were carrying out a daring robbery.

According to what they had said, the detached car had aboard some very

valuable freight: nothing less than a safe. And Ike had intimated that it contained "a fortune apiece."

This seemed incredible to Ralph. All the same, he realized that they had isolated the car to loot it.

"In an hour they will have their booty," he reflected rapidly. "Can I foot it to Dover in time? No way to wire. Why, I'll do it!"

A quick idea came into Ralph's mind. He would anticipate the robbers. He ran fast as he could to the locomotive on the siding.

Ralph Fairbanks never valued his practical roundhouse experience so greatly as during the ensuing fifteen minutes.

He knew all about a locomotive, for he had been a shop hand to some profit. He lit the fire, set the steam gauges, piled on the coal. Steam up, he backed towards the spur, stopped, opened a switch, and glided west after the runaway car.

As he rounded a curve he noticed that the spur had two tracks, and he had by chance taken the outer one.

The tracks ran parallel, however. There must be switches further on, he decided, and he put on a fair head of steam and sped on his way.

The spur ran in and out a hilly district with numerous curves. At length there was a level stretch. Ralph whizzed by the detached car, standing stationary at the end of a steep grade about a quarter of a mile from the main rails where it had been started.

He took a new curve, slowed up, and began looking for a switch. The tracks ended near a dismantled ruin. It had evidently once been in use as a factory, but now, like the spur tracks, was abandoned.

At this terminus were several switches. Ralph got righted on the inside rails and started back for the detached car.

There were as many as four curves to pass, all breasting elevations at the side. Ralph proceeded rather slowly. As he reached the final open stretch, however, his hand came down sharply on the lever.

He pulled the throttle open. A glance had warned him that there was no time now to dally.

It was not quite dark yet. Some lanterns were now at the side of the detached car.

Near it was a horse and wagon. The side door of the car was open. One of the tramps was carrying a rope from the wagon. The other was just climbing into the car.

Ralph drove the locomotive forward so promptly that the alarmed shout of the man coming from the wagon was mingled with a resounding crash, as the bulkheads of the cow-catcher struck the end of the car. The freight was momentarily lifted from its trucks. Then car and engine swept on.

The tramp, just climbing into the car when the contact came, was knocked free of his hold by the shock. He went keeling over and over in the gravel by the side of the track.

From the inside of the car sounded loud and fervent yells. Ralph kept his eye fixed on the side of the freight. A head was thrust out--two of them.

Staring back in startled wonder, Ike Slump and Mort Bemis saw what had happened, and marvelled.

They did not attempt to jump. Ralph believed that they recognized him. Whether this were true or not, just as the locomotive reached the main road bed a report rang out. A bullet smashed in the front window of the cab.

Ralph dodged down. His enemies were driven to desperate straits. He held back from the window out of range, but kept his hand firmly on the lever.

A glance showed what he was running into. The stationary freights blocked his course. Ralph slowed up. Then, as the expected contact came, he put on full steam again.

A momentary halt had given Bemis a chance to leave the detached car in safety. As the locomotive glided by he grabbed at its step.

Ralph threw out one foot. It met Mort's jaw, and sent him spinning clear of his hold.

The locomotive was now pushing the entire train. Ralph's heart began to beat fast. He dared not stop, for Slump was probably armed, and his confederates might come in pursuit.

Ralph did not know what he might run into, or what might run into him. He was a "wild" of the most reckless description. It was make or break for Dover, now!

"He's jumped!" exclaimed Ralph.

A dark form, that of Ike Slump, leaped from the car ahead as it passed a morass. Ralph ventured to lean out of the cab window.

He could make out the nearing lights of Dover. Glancing back, he saw by the signals that the tracks were clear for the regular service.

Toot-toot-too-oot-too-oot!

Far and wide rang the ear-splitting alarm signal. Ralph kept it up continuously. Then, as he neared the crossings tower lights at Dover, he shut off steam and jolted down to a dead stop.

Glancing back and ahead, he saw the signals change in a flash, blocking all rails.

A lantern moved down the tracks. Two men came running towards the freights and along them till they reached the locomotive.

One of the men was evidently the head towerman. He glared wildly up at Ralph.

"What in thunder is this?" he cried.

"Why, you may call it a special," answered Ralph promptly.

"Special?" roared the irate towerman--"special what?"

"A special treasure train, I would call it, from what I learn," said Ralph coolly. "I have just run it clear of four robbers, and I understand it has 'four fortunes' in it."

CHAPTER XXXI--HALF A MILLION DOLLARS

"Name?"

"Fairbanks."

"Ah, I have heard of you. Towerman at Stanley Junction--first name Ralph?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wasn't it you who made that terrifically heroic run through the fire at the Acton freight yards with engineer John Griscom?"

"I was there, yes," admitted Ralph modestly.

"Thought so. Shake. Proud to know you, Mr. Fairbanks, and glad to see you are keeping your name clean and bright on the railroad roll of honor."

"Thank you."

Ralph sat in the room of the assistant superintendent at Dover, an hour after taking the special into safety. He had made a brief explanation to the towerman. The freights were sidetracked, a dozen watchmen guarded the cars, as many specials were sent back to South Dover to attempt the capture of the robbers.

"Here," spoke the assistant superintendent, summoning a messenger, "take that wire for Stanley Junction. Fairbanks, do you happen to know that you have done an amazing thing?"

Ralph shook his head with an uncertain smile.

"Well, you have. I have wired the Junction that you can't go back to-night."

"But my leave of absence was only temporary."

"Don't let that disturb you at all," said the assistant superintendent. "The road needs you here at present. I fancy the road will be very likely to acknowledge

your services of to-night. You have prevented the theft of half a million dollars."

Ralph started at this monstrous statement. It seemed incredible.

"That is right. The real owner of the sum will probably give you a bank calendar free, or sue the Great Northern for delay. All the same, the road feels its obligation to you, and I want you to know it. You will have to stay here till we get this matter straightened out. You see, you are the only person who can identify those robbers--if they are caught. You will stay at my home to-night."

The assistant superintendent then went over the entire matter in detail, and Ralph heard an interesting story.

A parsimonious country banker--who seemed to be a sort of second edition of Gasper Farrington--had decided to move his bank from its original location to a point two hundred miles distant.

Too niggardly to purchase the security of his money by sending it by express, he had put it and his securities in a small safe. This he had boxed up, and had shipped it by special freight as merchandise.

How Slump and Bemis had got wind of the proceeding, Ralph could only theorize. They had certainly planned well to make off with this magnificent booty.

How Van Sherwin had been able to send the intimation he had to Ralph, was yet to be explained.

The railroad official treated Ralph like a prince. Both of the tramps were captured and placed in jail. They claimed they had simply been hired by Slump and Bemis to work for them.

The next morning the banker who had so nearly lost his banking capital arrived in hot haste.

He proceeded to express his precious belongings the rest of the way--for which the express company proceeded to charge him as strong as the case would stand.

"Ha, hum," this individual observed, as he shook Ralph's hand--"a slight--ha, hum--testimonial. Don't mention it!"

Ralph exhibited a dollar bill to the curious and furious assistant superintendent as the banker withdrew. Then he handed it to the messenger, with the remark:

"You take your own risk in trying to pass it!"

Just before noon Ralph was given a telegram from Stanley Junction, signed by Slavin.

It read:

"Hear you are at Dover, so I will wire. Needed in S.J. V.S. and Mrs. D. here, G.F. in a panic. Quick action needed. Come."

Ralph told the assistant superintendent of the urgent message.

"Of course you must go," said the latter, "but you will have to come down

and identify the two prisoners in court in a day or two. By the way, we have sent a full report of the case to headquarters. I would suggest, Fairbanks, if you are tired of tower service, you won't have to ask for promotion."

"Not tired of it, sir," explained Ralph, "only anxious to get higher up the ladder as fast as I can."

"Very good. You've earned a good boost this time," declared the assistant superintendent.

Ralph reached Stanley Junction just after dark. He left the train at the limits and took a short rut home.

The front of the little cottage was aglow with cheerful light, and he knew there was "company."

Ralph burst in upon his good friend, Van, with a boisterous welcome. More gently, but none the less sincerely, he greeted Mrs. Davis. She sat in a comfortable armchair, rather pale and feeble-looking, but smiling through her happy tears.

Young Slavin occupied a humble seat at one side of the room.

"Lawyer made me come," he whispered to Ralph,--"waiting for him now."

"What lawyer?" inquired Ralph in surprise.

"One Van got. Oh, he's been running all the switches this afternoon, I can tell you!"

Just there Van beckoned to Ralph, and led him into an adjoining room, closing the door on the others.

CHAPTER XXXII--CONCLUSION

"You had best know just how things stand," remarked Van Sherwin, as he proceeded to tell an interesting story.

Van had learned from Ralph's note sent to him to the town jail that Ike Slump or Mort Bemis had the documents stolen from Mrs. Davis' little tin box.

He had watched his fellow prisoners closely, finally discovering that the papers were carried by Slump in a secret inner coat pocket.

The very night that Slump and Bemis escaped, Van with a window pole reached into the cell, got the garment in question, and left his own coat in its place.

He secured the stolen documents. Folded in with them was a receipt for somebody's board at a place called Millville. Van decided that this was the place where Mrs. Davis was imprisoned, or detained.

He intended to gain his freedom in the morning early. In the meantime, as the reader is aware, Slump and Bemis escaped. The former was probably unaware in the darkness that he was wearing Van's coat instead of his own.

Van started forthwith to locate Mrs. Davis. He found there were two Millvilles, and it was several days before he settled down on the right one. It took several more to locate Mrs. Davis' present guardians.

They proved to be a wretched couple in an isolated farmhouse. They kept their prisoner in a barred attic room.

Mrs. Davis had missed a paper which told where the tin box was secreted. This her jailers had probably given to Slump, who thus obtained a clew as to the whereabouts of the documents.

Van managed to rescue Mrs. Davis without being discovered by her guardians. That very day he came upon Slump and Bemis near the old farmhouse.

He secreted himself and overheard some of their conversation. They had squandered all of their ready money, and dared not return to Stanley Junction. They had come to the farmhouse to remove Mrs. Davis, and with her in their hands blackmail Farrington afresh.

They had discovered her escape, and then they talked of a last desperate scheme. It was to "hold up" something or somebody at South Dover.

Van could not leave Mrs. Davis, to follow or pursue them. He wrote the hurried postal to Ralph that had got wet and blurred in transmission, but, despite which fact, Ralph had managed to utilize with such grand results.

Mrs. Davis' secret was a simple one. As has been said, her husband was none other than Van's adopted father, Farwell Gibson, who had been fleeced by Gasper Farrington along with Ralph's own father.

The magnate had maligned Gibson so that Mrs. Gibson left him. They became strangers, and later Farrington claimed he was dead.

Mrs. Gibson, or Mrs. Davis as she now called herself, became quite poor. She discovered among some old papers an agreement between herself, Mr. Fairbanks, and Gasper Farrington about the twenty thousand dollars' worth of railroad bonds.

This document showed plainly that in equity she had a quarter interest, and Mrs. Fairbanks the balance in these bonds really held in trust by Farrington.

She had come to Stanley Junction to sell this paper to Farrington. Embittered

by her sad past, she had no thoughts of the rights of others, until Ralph did her a kindly act and changed all the motives of her life.

Now, after learning from Van how her husband had been wronged and misrepresented by Farrington, she longed to secure her five thousand dollars to assist him in beginning his short-line railroad.

"There will be a happy reunion," Van told Ralph. "As to the money, the twenty thousand dollars, I have had a lawyer working on her claim and yours all day long. They say that Slump wrote a letter to some friend here, telling all about Farrington's dealings with him. The local paper threatens an exposé, and this, with the factory fire and our claim, has driven the miserable old schemer nearly to his wits' end. Ah, there is the lawyer now."

Ralph knew the legal gentleman in question. They rejoined the others in the front parlor.

"Have you seen Farrington?" asked Van promptly.

"No," responded the lawyer. "He has secluded himself, and refuses to be seen. I have had to deal with him through his attorney. It has been quibble and evasion all day long. Just now, however, they arrived at an ultimatum."

"What is it?" inquired Ralph.

"Farrington is near to nervous collapse. His losses and his fears of disgrace have driven him to leave Stanley Junction until the storm has blown over. His lawyer admits the justice of our claim. He asks that they be given a little time to settle it."

"Not an hour, if the claim is just and right!" declared Ralph sternly. "We have been kept out of our rights all these years."

"Then I have a suggestion to make," said the lawyer. "I have no doubt whatever of your forcing payments in time. The only thing is, that crafty old fox, Farrington, will scheme for delay. He intends to get it by taking a trip to Europe."

"Out of the country?" exclaimed Ralph.

"So I learn. In fact, he has left, or is leaving now. That will be unfortunate for your case. Now, if you could get service on him before he leaves, you head off his dilatory arrangements."

"What kind of service?" asked Van.

"A legal demand of your claim, to be proven in court if he does not settle. That would bring his lawyer to time. I have prepared the demand--in fact, I have a man waiting outside to serve it--if you can suggest any way to reach Farrington."

"Why, if he is leaving for Europe to-night," said Ralph, arising to his feet and consulting his watch, "he will have to take the southern train."

"Not from the Stanley Junction depot, I fancy," observed the lawyer.

"No, he will probably get on at the limits, or down at Acton, and take the train there."

"See here," spoke up Slavin suddenly--"leave this to me, will you?"

"How do you mean?" inquired Ralph.

"Send your man with me," said Slavin to the lawyer. "The railroad people will give me every chance to nab my man, if I tell them it's for Ralph Fairbanks."

"Very good," nodded the lawyer with satisfaction, "try it with my man, if you will."

There was so much to discuss, that Ralph, Van, and the two ladies sat up until long past midnight.

Just as they were retiring, the lawyer's messenger appeared at the front door of the cottage.

"O.K.," he said, with a chuckle.

"Got your man?" asked Van.

"Sure thing. Farrington sneaked on to the train at Acton, disguised, and hid in a sleeper. The conductor knew Fairbanks here, and Slavin did the rest. Snaked him out of his berth, and made him acknowledge our legal demand. He's off for Europe, but I'll warrant won't tangle up his affairs here by letting you sue. But he has already wired his lawyer to settle with you people."

"Good!" shouted Ralph, and his face showed his pleasure.

Everything seemed working out happily. Ralph came up into the switch tower with a bright, cheery face, next morning.

"Hello, Slavin," he said, noticing his muscular young friend at the levers--"practicing?"

"No, sir--on duty," answered Slavin with great dignity.

"What's that?" demanded Ralph sharply.

"Sure," coolly nodded Slavin, giving the levers a truly professional swing. "Don't talk to the leverman when he's busy--rule of the office, you, know, for outsiders."

"Ho! ho!" chuckled old Jack Knight.

"Outsiders?" repeated Ralph. "Call me one?"

"Ask Mr. Knight."

Ralph looked inquiringly at the veteran towerman.

"That's right," assented Knight. "Superintendent was just here. Put Slavin on the levers, and wants you up at headquarters."

"What for?" asked Ralph.

"Says you're due for promotion. Asked me what I thought about your choice. I told him fireman."

Ralph's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Thank you, Mr. Knight," he said. "If it's to be another step up the ladder, I would like it to be in just that line."

"You take another rung sure, that's settled," declared old Jack proudly. "And-

-you'll get to the top!"

One hour later Ralph Fairbanks was officially instructed by the superintendent of the Great Northern, that he had been promoted to a new branch of service.

How did he succeed? How well, and how his influence and example helped the success of his loyal railroad friends, will be told in a succeeding volume to be called "Ralph on the Engine; or, The Young Fireman of the Limited Mail."

For the time being he was very happy and so was his mother. Mrs. Fairbanks felt certain that they would soon be in possession of the property Gasper Farrington had so long kept from them.

"I think so myself, mother," said Ralph, and then he added with enthusiasm: "Isn't it wonderful how we have prospered!"

"Yes, Ralph."

"And to think that I am to be a regularly appointed fireman," he continued.

"I can see that you are bound to be a railroad man, Ralph," answered the fond parent with a faint smile. "Well, you take after your father. I surely wish you the best of luck in your chosen calling."

And so do we; is that not so, gentle reader?

THE END

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